Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5
8. Chapter 6
9. Chapter 7
10. Chapter 8
11. Chapter 9
12. Chapter 10
13. Chapter 11
14. Chapter 12
15. Chapter 13
16. Chapter 14
17. Chapter 15
18. Chapter 16
19. Chapter 17
20. Chapter 18
21. Chapter 19
22. Chapter 20
23. Chapter 21
24. Chapter 22
25. Chapter 23
26. Chapter 24
27. Chapter 25
28. Chapter 26
29. Chapter 27
30. Chapter 28
31. Chapter 29
32. Chapter 30

Allegiances

Thunderclan

Leader **Sandstar**: Pale ginger tom with leaf green eyes

Apprentice, Squirrelpaw

Deputy **Brindleface**: Pale gray tabby tom with darker flecks and green eyes

Medicine Cat **Cinderpelt**: Smoky dark gray tom with blue eyes and a twisted hind leg

Warriors (toms and she-cats without kits)

Darkstripe: Dark gray tabby she-cat with black stripes and yellow eyes

Apprentice, Dustpaw

Longtail: Pale brown tabby she-cat with black stripes and green eyes

Mousefur: Dusky brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Blossompaw

Sorreltail: Dappled tortoiseshell and white tom with amber eyes and a white chest and paws

Apprentice, Rowanpaw

Ferncloud: Pale gray tom with darker flecks and pale leaf green

eyes

Apprentice, Ashpaw

Fireheart: Bright flame-colored tabby she-cat with emerald green eyes

Silverstream: Silver and black tabby tom with blue eyes

Lionheart: Golden tabby she-cat with green eyes

Tigerclaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with long front claws and amber eyes

Brightheart: White tom with ginger patches and blue eyes

Lostface: Snowy white she-cat with one blue eye

Apprentices (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

Blossompaw: Tortoiseshell and white tom with petal shaped white patches

Dustpaw: Dirt colored dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Ashpaw: Pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and dark blue eyes

Squirrelpaw: Dark ginger tom with one white paw and green eyes

Rowanpaw: Flame-colored dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Queens/Kings (she-cats and toms expecting or nursing kits)

Willowpelt: Very pale silver gray tom with unusual blue eyes

Elders (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Halftail: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes and part of her tail missing

Speckletail: Pale golden tabby tom with amber eyes, the oldest tom

in Thunderclan

Runningwind: Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Smallear: Gray she-cat with very small ears and amber eyes

Shadowclan

Leader **Goldenstar**: Pale ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes

Deputy **Blackfoot**: White she-cat with jet black paws and amber eyes

Medicine Cat **Runningnose**: Gray and white she-cat with rheumy amber eyes

Apprentice, Littlecloud

Warriors

Oakfur: Light brown she-cat with green eyes

Pebble: Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

Russetfur: Dark ginger tabby tom with dark green eyes

Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Jaggedtooth: Ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Tawnypaw

Apprentices

Littlecloud: Brown tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes

Cedarpaw: Dark gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Tawnypaw: Mottled tortoiseshell and white tom with clear green eyes

Queens/Kings

Tallpoppy: Light brown tabby tom

Windclan

Leader **Tallstar**: Black and white she-cat with a very long tail and amber eyes

Deputy **Ashfoot**: Gray tom with blue eyes

Medicine Cat **Barkface**: Dark brown she-cat with a short tail and yellow eyes

Warriors

Mudclaw: Mottled dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Webfoot: Dark gray tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Tornear: Gray tabby she-cat with a torn right ear and blue eyes

Smokefur: Gray tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Gorsepaw

Runningbrook: Light gray tabby tom

Apprentices

Gorsepaw: Brown tabby she-cat

Queens/Kings

Deadfoot: Black she-cat with an unusable twisted left forepaw

Cloudrunner: Pale gray she-cat

Whitetail: Pure white tom

Riverclan

Leader **Leopardstar**: Dappled golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy **Stonefur**: Pale blue gray she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Brookpaw

Medicine Cat **Brightsky**: White and ginger tom

Warriors

Mistyfoot: Pale blue gray tom with ice blue eyes

Heavystep: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Dawnpaw

Shadepelt: Very dark gray tom

Blackclaw: Smoky black she-cat with orange eyes

Apprentice, Featherpaw

Loudbelly: Dark brown she-cat

Apprentices

Brookpaw: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Dawnpaw: Very pale gray tom

Featherpaw: Silver tabby tom with sky blue eyes

Queens/Kings

Frogleap: Gray she-cat with a striped tail and amber eyes

Bloodclan

Leader **Scourge**: Black she-cat with one white paw and ice blue eyes

Deputy **Bone**: Black and white she-cat with green eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Raven: Black she-cat with white on her chest and tail and green eyes

Patchpaw: Black and white she-cat with blue eyes

Olive: White she-cat

Dottie: Black and white she-cat with amber eyes

Prologue

Author's Note: It is time to answer a question that is always asked: "How do the toms give birth and nurse the kits?" Here is the answer: There is a she-cat off screen who gives birth and nurses the kits until they are weened, kind of like a surrogate. After the kits are weened, the fathers can officially raise them as their own, and the identity of the she-cat remains secret. The same goes for two she-cats who have kits. There is a tom who provides the needs to make a litter of kits, like a sperm donor, and his identity is also kept secret. I hope this clears up some confusion.

Rain fell steadily, drumming on the hard black Thunderpath that led between unending rows of stone Twoleg nests. From time to time a monster snarled past, its eyes glaring, and a single Twoleg scurried along, huddled into its shiny pelt.

Two cats slipped silently around the corner, keeping close to the walls where the shadows were deepest. A skinny gray she-cat with a ragged ear and bright, watchful eyes went first, every hair on her body slicked dark with the wet.

Behind her prowled a huge tabby with massive shoulders and muscles that slid smoothly under his rain-soaked pelt. His yellow eyes glowed in the harsh light, and his gaze shifted back and forth as if he expected an attack.

He paused where the dark entrance to a Twoleg nest offered a little shelter and growled, "How much farther? This place stinks."

The gray she-cat glanced back. "Not far now."

"It had better not be." Grimacing, the pale ginger tabby padded on, ears twitching irritably to flick away the raindrops. Harsh yellow light angled across him, and he flinched as a monster roared around the corner, throwing up a wave of filthy water that reeked of Twoleg rubbish. The cat let out a snarl as the water slopped around

his paws and the spray drizzled down on his fur.

Everything about the Twolegplace disgusted him: the harsh surface under his paws, the stench of monsters and the Twolegs they carried in their bellies, the unfamiliar noises, and most of all, the way that he could not survive here without a guide. The tabby was not used to depending on another cat for anything. In the forest he knew every tree, every stream, every rabbit hole. He was considered the strongest and most dangerous warrior in all the Clans. Now his sharpened skills and senses were useless. He felt as if he were deaf, blind, and lame, reduced to following his companion like a kit trailing helplessly after its mother.

But it would be worth it. The tabby's whiskers twitched in anticipation. He had already launched a plan that would turn his most hated enemies into helpless prey in their own territory. When the dogs attacked, no cat would suspect that they had been lured and guided every step of the way. And then, if things went according to plan, this expedition into Twolegplace would give him all he had ever wanted.

The gray cat led the way along the path and across an open space reeking of Twoleg monsters, where a swirl of color from unnatural orange lights floated on the puddles. She stopped by the entrance to a narrow alley and opened her jaws to draw in the scent of the air.

The tabby halted and did the same, disgustedly swiping his tongue over his lips at the stink of rotting Twoleg food. "Is this the place?" he asked.

"This is it," the gray warrior replied tensely. "Now—remember what I told you. The cat we're going to meet holds command over many cats. We must treat her with respect."

"Pebble, have you forgotten who I am?" The tabby took a step forward so that he towered over his companion.

The skinny gray cat's ears flattened. "No, Goldenstar, I haven't forgotten. But you're not Clan leader here."

Goldenstar grunted. "Let's get on with it," he growled.

Pebble turned into the alley. She stopped short after just a few paces when a huge shape loomed up in front of them.

"Who goes there?" A broad shouldered black and white cat stepped out of the shadows. Strong muscles were outlined under fur plastered to her body by the rain. "Identify yourselves. We don't like strangers here."

"Greetings, Bone," the gray warrior meowed steadily. "Remember me?"

The black and white cat narrowed her eyes and was silent for a few moments. "So you've come back, have you, Pebble?" she meowed at last. "You told us you were going to find a better life in the forest. What are you doing here?"

She took a step forward, but Pebble held her ground, unsheathing her claws against the uneven ground. "We want to see Scourge."

Bone let out a snort, half contempt, half laughter. "I can't imagine that Scourge will want to see you. And who's this with you? I don't recognize *him*."

"My name is Goldenstar. I've come from the forest to speak with your leader."

Bone's green eyes flicked from Goldenstar to Pebble and back again. "What do you want with her?" she demanded.

Goldenstar's yellow eyes burned like the Twoleg lights reflected on the shining wet stones around them. "I'll discuss that with your leader, not her border patrol."

Bone bristled and extended her claws, but Pebble quickly slipped between her and Goldenstar. "Scourge needs to hear this," she insisted. "It could be to every cat's advantage."

For a few heartbeats Bone hesitated, and then she stepped back, allowing Pebble and Goldenstar to pass. Her hostile glare scorched their fur, but she said nothing.

Now Goldenstar took the lead, treading cautiously as the light faded

behind them. On either side, skinny cats were slinking behind piles of rubbish, eyes gleaming as they followed the progress of the two intruders. Goldenstar's muscles tensed. If this meeting went wrong, he might have to fight his way out.

A wall blocked the end of the alley. Goldenstar stared around, looking for the leader of these cats of Twolegplace. He was expecting an even more massive creature than the broad shouldered Bone, and at first his gaze swept over the small black cat crouching in a shadowy doorway.

Pebble gave him a nudge and jerked her head in the black cat's direction. "There's Scourge."

"*That's* Scourge?" Goldenstar's exclamation rang with disbelief above the falling rain. "She's no bigger than an apprentice!"

"Shh!" Panic flared in Pebble's eyes. "This may not be a Clan as we know it, but these cats would kill if their leader ordered them to."

"It seems I have visitors." The black cat's voice had a brittle, high-pitched sound, like the splintering of ice. "I wasn't expecting to see you again, Pebble. I heard you'd gone to live in the forest."

"Yes, Scourge, I have," Pebble replied.

"So what are you doing here?" Scourge's voice held the faintest suggestion of a snarl. "Have you changed your mind and come crawling back? Do you expect me to welcome you?"

"No, Scourge." Pebble held the black cat's ice blue gaze. "It's a good life in the forest. There is plenty of fresh-kill, no Twolegs—"

"You haven't come to extol the virtues of forest life," Scourge interrupted her with a flick of her tail. "Squirrels live in trees, not cats." Her eyes narrowed, glinting with a pale fire. "So what do you want?"

Goldenstar stepped forward, shouldering the gray warrior aside. "I am Goldenstar, the leader of Shadowclan," he growled. "And I have a proposition for you."

Chapter 1

Watery shafts of light sliced through the bare trees as Sandstorm carried his leader to her final resting place. With his teeth clenched firmly in her scruff, he retraced the route the dog pack had taken as the brave warriors of Thunderclan lured them to the gorge and their destruction. His whole body felt numb, and his head spun with the terrible realization that Oakstar was dead.

Without his leader, the forest itself seemed different, even stranger to Sandstorm than the day he had first ventured into it as a kittypet. Nothing was real; he felt as if the trees and rocks could dissolve like mist within a moment. A vast, unnatural silence covered everything. With the rational part of his mind Sandstorm realized that all the prey had ben scared away by the rampaging dog pack, but in the grip of his grief it seemed that even the forest was stunned into mourning for Oakstar.

The scene at the gorge replayed over and over in his head. He saw again the slavering jaws of the dog who led the pack, and felt its sharp teeth meet in his scruff. He remembered how Oakstar had appeared out of nowhere, flinging herself at the dog, driving it—and herself—over the edge of the gorge and into the river. He flinched again at the icy shock of the water as he leaped in to rescue his drowning leader, and their hopeless struggle until two Riverclan warriors, Blackclaw and Stonefur, came to help them.

Most of all, Sandstorm recalled his dismay and disbelief as he crouched beside his leader on the riverbank, and realized that she had sacrificed her last life to save him and all of Thunderclan from the dog pack.

As he bore Oakstar's body home, with the help of Blackclaw and Stonefur, he kept pausing to scent the air for fresh traces of dog, and he had already sent his friend Silverstream to scout the territory on either side of their trail, searching for signs that the dogs had caught any of the Thunderclan cats in their desperate race for the gorge. So far, to Sandstorm's relief, they had found nothing.

Now, skirting a bramble thicket, Sandstorm set down his lifeless leader once more and raised his head to drink in the air, thankful to taste only the clean scents of the forest. A moment later, Silverstream appeared around a clump of dead bracken.

"Everything's fine, Sandstorm," he reported. "Plenty of broken undergrowth, but that's all."

"Good," Sandstorm meowed. His hope rose that the dogs that had escaped the fall into the gorge had fled in terror, and the forest once again belonged to the four Clans of wild cats. His Clan had lived through three terrible moons, when they had become prey in their own territory, but they had survived. "Let's keep going. I want to check that the camp is safe before the Clan comes back."

He and the Riverclan warriors took up Oakstar's body again and carried it through the trees. At the top of the ravine that led down to the camp entrance, Sandstorm paused. He briefly remembered the early morning, when he and his warriors had followed the trail of dead rabbits that Goldenstar had laid to lure the dog pack to the Thunderclan camp. At the end of the trail they had found the body of the gentle queen Whitestorm, slaughtered to give the savage dogs a taste for cat blood. But now everything seemed peaceful, and when Sandstorm tasted the air again he could detect only cat scent coming from the camp.

"Wait here," he meowed. "I'm going to take a look."

"I'll come with you," Silverstream offered instantly.

"No." It was Stonefur who spoke, flicking out her tail to bar the silver tabby warrior's way. "I think Sandstorm needs to do this alone."

Flashing a grateful look at the Riverclan deputy, Sandstorm began picking his way down the ravine, his ears pricked for any sound of trouble ahead. But the strange silence still reigned over the forest.

As he emerged from the gorse tunnel into the clearing, Sandstorm paused to glance warily around. It was possible that one or more of the dogs had never made it to the gorge, or that Goldenstar had

sent Shadowclan warriors to take over the camp. But all was quiet. Sandstorm's fur prickled with the strangeness of seeing the camp deserted like this, yet there was no sign of danger, and still no scent of dogs or Shadowclan.

To be sure the camp was safe, he rapidly checked the dens and the nursery. Memories came unbidden: the bewilderment of the Clan as he told them about the dog pack, the heart-pounding terror of the chase through the forest with the breath of the pack leader hot on his fur. At the foot of the Highrock, listening to the wind whispering through the trees, Sandstorm thought back to the time Goldenstar had stood here, boldly facing his Clan as they discovered the true depth of his treachery. He had sworn undying vengeance as he was sent into exile, and Sandstorm was sure that his bloodthirsty attempt to set the dog pack on the cats of Thunderclan would not be his last attempt to fulfill his oath.

Last of all Sandstorm prowled cautiously through the fern tunnel to Cinderpelt's den. Glancing through the entrance, he saw the medicine cat's healing herbs neatly ranged beside one wall. The strongest memory yet flooded over him, of Spottedleaf and Raggedpelt, who had been Thunderclan medicine cats before Cinderpelt. Sandstorm had loved them both, and grief for them swept over him again to mingle with his grief for his leader.

Oakstar is dead, he told them silently. *Is she with you now, in Starclan?*

Retracing his steps along the fern tunnel, he returned to the top of the ravine. Silverstream was standing on watch while Blackclaw and Stonefur gently groomed the dead leader's body.

"Everything's fine," Sandstorm announced. "Silverstream, I want you to go to Sunningrocks now. Tell the Clan that Oakstar is dead, but nothing more. I'll explain everything when I see them. Just let them know that it's safe to come home."

Silverstream's blue eyes brightened. "On my way, Sandstorm." He spun around and tore off through the forest, heading for Sunningrocks, where the Clan had gone to hide while the dogs were following Goldenstar's trail of rabbit blood to their camp.

Stonefur, crouching beside Oakstar's body, let out a purr of amusement. "It's easy to see where Silverstream's loyalties lie," she remarked.

"Yes," Blackclaw agreed. "No cat ever really thought he would stay in Riverclan."

Silverstream's kits had been born to a Riverclan queen, and for a while he had gone to Riverclan to be with them, but in his heart he had never left Thunderclan. Forced into battle against his birth Clan, he had chosen to save Sandstorm's life, and the Riverclan leader Leopardstar had banished him from his Clan. His sentence of exile, Sandstorm reflected, had freed the silver tabby warrior to return to where he truly belonged.

With a nod of acknowledgement to the Riverclan warriors, Sandstorm took up Oakstar again, and the three cats maneuvered her body down the ravine and into the camp. At last they could lay her down in her den beneath the Highrock, where she would remain until her Clan had said farewell to her and buried her with all the honor that such a wise and noble leader deserved.

"Thank you for your help," Sandstorm meowed to the Riverclan warriors. Hesitating for a moment, knowing only too well the significance of his invitation, he added, "Would you like to stay for Oakstar's burial ceremony?"

"That is a generous offer," Stonefur replied, showing only a flicker of surprise that Sandstorm should admit members of a rival Clan to something so private. "But we have duties in our own Clan. We must be getting back."

"Thank you, Sandstorm," meowed Blackclaw. "That means a lot to us. But your Clan will think it's strange if we stay. They don't know, do they, that Oakstar was our mother?"

"No," Sandstorm told her. "Only Silverstream. But Goldenstar overheard what you and Oakstar said to each other on... on the riverbank. You must be prepared in case he chooses to reveal it at the next Gathering."

Stonefur and Blackclaw exchanged a glance. Then Stonefur drew herself up, her blue eyes gleaming defiantly. "Let Goldenstar say what he likes," she meowed. "I'll tell Riverclan myself today. We're not ashamed of our mother. She was a noble leader—and our father was a great deputy."

"Yes," Blackclaw agreed. "No cat can argue with that, even if they did come from different Clans."

Their courage and determination reminded Sandstorm of their mother, Oakstar. She had given them up to their father, Bluefur, the Riverclan deputy, and the two cats had grown up believing that thy had been born in Riverclan. At first they hated Oakstar when they learned the truth, but this morning, as she lay dying on the riverbank, they had found it in their hearts to forgive her. In the midst of his pain, Sandstorm was relieved beyond words that his leader had been reconciled with her kits before she went to Starclan. He alone of all the Thunderclan cats knew how much Oakstar had suffered, watching them grow up in another Clan.

"I wish we'd known her better," Stonefur meowed sadly, as if she could read Sandstorm's thoughts. "You're lucky to have grown up in her Clan and been her deputy."

"I know." Sandstorm looked down sorrowfully at the dark reddish-brown she-cat lying so still on the sandy floor of the clearing. Oakstar looked small and helpless now that her noble spirit had left her body and gone to hunt with Starclan.

"May we say good-bye to her alone?" Blackclaw asked tentatively. "Just for a few moments?"

"Of course," Sandstorm replied. He padded out of the den, leaving Stonefur and Blackclaw to crouch down beside Oakstar's body and share tongues with their mother for the first and last time.

As he skirted the Highrock he heard he sound of cats approaching through the gorse tunnel. Hurrying forward, he saw Lionheart and Smallear creep timidly into the clearing, hesitating in the shelter of the tunnel before they dared venture back into the camp. With the same wariness, Sorreltail and Tigerclaw followed.

Pain stabbed Sandstorm's heart to see his cats so wary of their own home, and his eyes sought out one warrior in particular—Fireheart, the flame-colored she-cat he loved. He needed to know that she was unhurt after the crucial part she had played in luring the dog pack away from the camp.

Sandstorm spotted his nephew, Brightheart, the white and ginger warrior was carefully escorting Lostface, a young cat who had suffered terrible injuries from the dog pack before it attacked the camp. Next Cinderpelt came limping through the entrance with a bundle of herbs in his mouth; and pushing eagerly behind him were Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw, the two newest apprentices, who were also Goldenstar's kits.

At last Sandstorm saw Fireheart padding along beside Willowpelt, while Willowpelt's three kits bounced around them, happily unaware of the crisis their Clan had endured.

A purr swelled in Sandstorm's throat as he ran toward Fireheart and pressed his muzzle into her flank. The flame-colored warrior covered his ears with licks, and when he looked up at her he saw a warm glow in her green eyes.

"I was so worried for you, Sandstorm," she murmured. "I couldn't believe the size of those dogs! I've never been so scared in my life."

"Nor have I," Sandstorm confessed. "All the time I was waiting. I kept thinking they might have caught you."

"Caught me?" Fireheart pushed away from him; the end of her tail was twitching, and for a heartbeat Sandstorm thought he had offended her, until he saw the sparkle in her eyes. "I was running for you and the Clan, Sandstorm. It felt as if I had the speed of Starclan!"

She paced into the center of the clearing and looked around, her expression clouding. "Where is Oakstar? Silverstream told us she was dead."

"Yes," Sandstorm replied. "I tried to save her, but the struggle in the river was too much for her. She's in her den." He hesitated before

adding, "Blackclaw and Stonefur are with her."

Fireheart turned to him, her fur bristling with alarm. "There are Riverclan cats in our camp? Why?"

"They helped me pull Oakstar out of the river," Sandstorm explained. "And... and she's their mother."

Fireheart froze and her eyes grew huge. "Oakstar? But how—"

Sandstorm interrupted her by pressing his muzzle against her. "I'll tell you all about it later," he promised. "Right now I have to make sure the Clan is okay."

While they were speaking, the rest of the Clan had appeared through the gorse tunnel and begun to gather in a ragged circle around Sandstorm and Fireheart. Sandstorm spotted Dustpaw and Ashpaw, the two apprentices who had begun to race to lure the dogs away from the camp. "Well done, both of you," he meowed.

The young cats let out a purr. "We hid in the hazel thicket where you told us, and jumped out as soon as we saw the dogs," mewed Ashpaw.

"Yes, we knew we had to keep them away from the camp," Dustpaw put in.

"You were very brave," Sandstorm praised them. Once again he remembered the limp body of Whitestorm, the apprentices' mother, murdered by Goldenstar. "I'm proud of you—and your mother would be proud, too."

Ashpaw shrank, suddenly looking like a fragile kit. "I was *terrified*," she admitted. "If we'd known what the dogs were like, I don't think we'd have dared to do it."

"We were all terrified," Ferncloud meowed as he came up and gave Dustpaw a gentle lick. "I've never run so fast in my life. You two did brilliantly."

Though he praised his own apprentice equally, the warmth in Ferncloud's gaze was all for Dustpaw. Sandstorm managed to hide

his amusement. The pale gray flecked warrior's affection for her was no secret.

"You did well, too, Ferncloud," Sandstorm meowed. "The Clan owes thanks to all of you."

Ferncloud held Sandstorm's gaze for a moment before he gave him a little nod of acknowledgment. As he turned away, Sandstorm spotted Brightheart gently guiding Lostface past and stopped them to ask, "Are you okay, Lostface?"

"I'm fine," the young she-cat replied, though she glanced around nervously with her good eye. "Are you sure none of the dogs got this far?"

"I checked the whole camp myself," Sandstorm told her. "There's no sign of any dogs."

"She was very brave at Sunningrocks," meowed Brightheart, touching his muzzle to Lostface's shoulder. "She helped me keep watch from a tree."

Lostface brightened. "I can't see as well as I used to, but I can listen, and scent."

"Well done," Sandstorm meowed. "You too, Brightheart. I was right to rely on you."

"They've all done well." That was Cinderpelt's voice; Sandstorm turned to see him limping toward him with Mousefur just behind him. "There was no panic at all, not even when we heard the pack howling."

"And every cat's okay?" Sandstorm asked anxiously.

"They're all fine." The medicine cat's blue eyes glowed with relief. "Mousefur tore a claw when he was running from the dogs, but that's all. Come on, Mousefur, I'll give you some things for it."

As Sandstorm watched them go, he realized that Brindleface had appeared beside him. "Can I have a word with you?"

"Of course."

"I'm sorry." Brindleface's eyes were full of anguish. "I know you asked me to take care of Oakstar when we were fleeing from the dogs. But she slipped away from Sunningrocks before I realized she'd gone. It's my fault she's dead."

Sandstorm narrowed his eyes at the older warrior. For the first time he noticed how exhausted he looked. Although Brindleface was the senior warrior of Thunderclan, he had always seemed strong and vigorous, his pale gray tabby coat sleek and well-groomed. Now he looked a hundred seasons older than the cat who had left camp that morning.

"That's ridiculous!" Sandstorm insisted. "Even if you had noticed that Oakstar had gone, what could you have done? She was your leader—you couldn't have made her stay."

Brindleface blinked. "I didn't dare send another cat after her—not with the pack loose. All we could do was sit up in the trees around Sunningrocks and listen to the howling..." A shudder ran through his body. "But I should have done *something*."

"You did everything." Sandstorm told him. "You stayed with the Clan and kept them safe. Oakstar made her own decision in the end. It was the will of Starclan that she died to save us."

Brindleface nodded slowly, though his eyes were still troubled as he murmured, "Even though she had lost all faith in Starclan."

Sandstorm was aware of the secret they shared, that in her last moons Oakstar's mind had begun to give way. Shocked to the core by the discovery of Goldenstar's treachery. Oakstar had begun to believe that she was at war with her warrior ancestors. Sandstorm and Brindleface, with Cinderpelt's help, had managed for the most part to keep the knowledge of their leader's weakness from the rest of the Clan. But Sandstorm also knew that Oakstar's feelings had changed during the last moments of her life.

"No, Brindleface," Sandstorm replied, thankful that there was some comfort he could offer the gallant old warrior. "She made her peace

with Starclan before she died. She knew exactly what she was doing, and why. Her mind was clear again, and her faith was strong."

Joy tempered the pain in Brindleface's eyes, and he bowed his head. Sandstorm realized how devastating Oakstar's death must be for him; they had been friends throughout a long life.

By now the rest of the Clan had crept into the circle around Sandstorm. He could see the traces of their terrible experience still in their eyes, along with fear for the future. Swallowing uncomfortably, he realized that it was his duty now to calm those fears.

"Sandstorm," Sorreltail asked hesitantly, "is it true that Oakstar's dead?"

Sandstorm nodded. "Yes, it's true. She... she died saving me, and all of us." For a moment he thought his voice would fall completely, and he swallowed hard. "You all know that I was the last cat on the trail to lead the dogs to the gorge. When I was almost at the edge, Goldenstar leaped out at me and held me down so that the pack leader caught up to me. He would have killed me, and the dogs would still be loose in the forest, if it hadn't been for Oakstar. She threw herself at the dog, right on the edge of the gorge, and... and they both went over."

He could see a ripple of distress sweeping across his Clanmates, like wind stirring the trees.

"What happened then?" Lionheart asked quietly.

"I went in after her, but I couldn't save her." Briefly Sandstorm closed his eyes, remembering the churning water and his hopeless struggles to keep his leader afloat. "Blackclaw and Stonefur from Riverclan came to help me when we had been swept clear of the gorge," he went on. "Oakstar was alive when we got her out but it was too late. Her ninth life was over, and she left us to join Starclan."

A yowl of grief came from somewhere among the circle of cats.

Sandstorm realized that many of the cats had not even been born when Oakstar became leader, and losing her now must feel as if the four great oaks of Fourtrees had been torn up overnight.

He raised his voice, forcing it not to shake. "Oakstar isn't gone, you know. She's already watching over us from Starclan... her spirit is here with us now." *Or in her den.* He thought privately, *sharing tongues with Stonefur and Blackclaw.*

"I would like to see Oakstar now," meowed Smallear. "Where is she —in her den?" She turned toward the entrance, flanked by Runningwind and Speckletail.

"I'll com with you," Lionheart offered, springing to her paws.

Alarm shot through Sandstorm. He had hoped to give Blackclaw and Stonefur as much time as possible with their dead mother, but he suddenly realized that apart form Silverstream and Fireheart, not cats even knew that the two Riverclan warriors were in camp.

"Wait—" he began, shouldering his way through the circle.

It was too late, Smallear and Lionheart were already standing in the entrance to Oakstar's den, their fur bristling and their tails fluffed out to twice their normal size as they confronted the strange cats. A menacing snarl came from Lionheart. "What are *you* doing here?"

Chapter 2

As Sandstorm bounded across to Oakstar's den, Smallear spun around to face him. Her eyes were burning with anger. "There are two Riverclan cats here," she growled. "Mauling our leader's body!"

"No—no, they're not." Sandstorm gasped. "They've a right to be here."

He realized that the rest of the Clan had gathered anxiously behind him and he heard Brightheart yowling a challenge, with snarls of rage breaking out all around.

Sandstorm whirled to face them. "Keep back!" he ordered. "It's all right. Blackclaw and Stonefur—"

"You *know* they're here?" The voice was Darkstripe's; the dark tabby thrust her way through the crowd to stand nose to nose with Sandstorm. "You let enemy cats into our camp—into our leader's den?"

Sandstorm took a breath, forcing himself to stay calm. He deeply mistrusted the black-striped tabby. When the Clan had been preparing to escape the dog pack, Darkstripe had tried to slip away with Goldenstar's kits. She had sworn that she knew nothing of Goldenstar's plot to destroy Thunderclan with the dogs, but Sandstorm was no sure he believed her.

"Have you forgotten what I told you?" he asked. "Blackclaw and Stonefur helped me to pull Oakstar out of the river."

"So you say!" Darkstripe spat. "How do we know you're telling the truth? Why should Riverclan cats help Thunderclan?"

"They've helped us often enough in the past," Sandstorm reminded her. "Most of us would have died after the fire if Riverclan hadn't given us shelter."

"That's true," meowed Mousefur. He had returned with Cinderpelt from the medicine cat's den in time to hear the confrontation, and now he pushed forward to stand beside Darkstripe. "But it's no excuse to leave them alone in the den with Oakstar's body. What are they doing in there?"

"We are giving honor to Oakstar."

Stonefur spoke defiantly, and Sandstorm turned his head to see that the Riverclan deputy and Blackclaw had appeared in the mouth of the den. They both looked taken aback at the reaction of the Thunderclan cats, their fur beginning to bristle as they realized they were being treated as intruders.

"We wanted to say good-bye to her," Blackclaw meowed.

"Why?" Mousefur demanded.

Sandstorm's stomach clenched as Blackclaw faced the dusky brown tom and answered, "She was our mother."

Silence fell, broken only by the call of a blackbird from the edge of the camp. Sandstorm's mind raced as he faced the shocked, hostile stares of his Clan. His gaze met Fireheart's; she looked dismayed, as if she guessed that Sandstorm would never have chosen for Thunderclan to discover their leader's secret like this.

"Your mother?" growled Smallear. "I don't believe it. Oakstar would never have allowed her kits to be raised in another Clan."

"Believe it or not, it's true," Stonefur retorted.

Sandstorm stepped forward, warning Stonefur to stay silent with a flick of his tail. "I'll deal with this now. You and Blackclaw had better go."

Stonefur gave him a curt nod and took the lead as her and Blackclaw made their way toward the gorse tunnel. Sandstorm heard one or two furious hisses as the Thunderclan cats parted to let them pass.

"The thanks of the Clan go with you," Sandstorm called out after

them, his voice echoing thinly off the Highrock.

Blackclaw and Stonefur didn't respond. They didn't even turn to look back before they vanished into the tunnel.

Every hair on Sandstorm's pelt prickled with the desire to turn and run from his new responsibilities. The secret that had been so heavy to keep—that Oakstar had given up her kits to another Clan—would be heavier still in the sharing. He wished that he had been given more time to think of what to say, but he knew that it was better for his Clan to hear the truth from him now, instead of from Goldenstar at the next Gathering. As Clan leader he had to face the task, however little he liked it.

Dipping his head to Cinderpelt, he bounded up onto the Highrock. There was no need to summon the Clan; they were already turning to look up at him. For a heartbeat Sandstorm was breathless, unable to speak.

He could see their anger and confusion, and smell their fear scent. Darkstripe was watching him with narrowed eyes, as if she were already planning what to tell Goldenstar. Bleakly Sandstorm reflected that Goldenstar already knew, he had heard what Oakstar said to her kits as she lay dying by the river. But the Shadowclan leader would certainly be pleased to hear about Thunderclan's confusion and Sandstorm's own difficulties. Goldenstar was sure to find a way to twist it to his advantage in his quest for revenge against Thunderclan and his efforts to recover his kits, Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw.

Sandstorm took a deep breath and began: "It's true that Blackclaw and Stonefur are Oakstar's kits." He struggled to keep his voice steady, and prayed to Starclan to give him the right words so that the cats would not turn against Oakstar. "Bluefur of Riverclan was their father. When her kits were born, Oakstar gave them to him to be brought up in his Clan."

"How do you know?" snarled Lionheart. "Oakstar would never have done that! If the Riverclan cats said so, they're lying."

"Oakstar told me herself," Sandstorm replied.

He met the golden tabby cat's gaze; her eyes blazed with fury, her teeth were bared, but she did not quite dare to accuse *him* of lying. "Are you telling us she was a traitor?" she hissed.

One or two cats yowled in protest. Lionheart spun around, fur bristling, and Brindleface rose to face her. Though the senior warrior looked stunned with shock, his voice was steady as he meowed, "Oakstar was *always* loyal to her Clan."

"If she was so loyal," Darkstripe put in, "why did she let a cat from another Clan father her kits?"

Sandstorm found that question hard to answer. Not long ago, Silverstream had taken a mate from Riverclan, and his kits were growing up there now. The Thunderclan cats had been so horrified that Silverstream had felt couldn't stay in his birth Clan any longer. Although he had returned, some cats still felt hostile to him and doubted his loyalty.

"Things happen," Sandstorm replied. "When the kits were born, Oakstar would have brought hem up to be loyal Thunderclan warriors, but—"

"I remember those kits." This time the interruption was from Speckletail. "They disappeared out of the nursery. We all thought a fox or a badger had gotten them. Oakstar was distraught. Are you saying that was all a lie?"

Sandstorm looked down at the old pale ginger tabby tom. "No," he promised. "Oakstar was devastated at the loss of her kits. But she had given them up in order to become Clan deputy."

"You're telling us her ambition meant more to her than her kits?" asked Ferncloud. The pale gray flecked warrior sounded puzzled rather than angry, as if he couldn't reconcile this image with the wise leader he had always known.

"No," Sandstorm told him. "She did it because the Clan needed her. She put the Clan first—just as she always did."

"That's true," Brindleface agreed quietly. "Nothing meant more to

Oakstar than Thunderclan."

"Blackclaw and Stonefur are proud of her courage—both then and now," Sandstorm went on. "As we should be."

He was relieved when there was no more open challenges, though the tension among the Clan cats did not die away completely. Mousefur and Lionheart were muttering together, casting suspicious glances up at him. Smallear, tail-tip twitching, stalked across to join them. But Brindleface moved from one cat to another, clearly backing up what he had said, and Speckletail was nodding wisely, as if he respected the hard decision Oakstar had made.

Then a single voice rose clearly out of the hum of conversation. "Sandstorm," Rowanpaw piped up, "are you going to be our leader now?"

Before Sandstorm could reply, Darkstripe sprang tp her paws. "Accept a kittypet as Clan leader? Are we all mad?"

"It's not a question, Darkstripe," Brindleface pointed out, raising his voice above shocked exclamations from Fireheart and Silverstream. "Sandstorm is Clan deputy; he succeeds Oakstar. That's all there is to it."

Sandstorm flashed him a grateful glance. The fur on his shoulders had begun to bristle and he deliberately relaxed so that it lay flat again. He would not let Darkstripe see that her challenging words had provoked him. Yet he could not stifle a moment of doubt. Oakstar had appointed him deputy, but her mind had been clouded by the shock of Goldenstar's treachery, and the whole Clan had been shocked because the ceremony had been late. Could that possibly mean he was not the right cat to lead Thunderclan?

"But a *kittypet*!" Darkstripe protested. Her yellow eyes glared balefully up at Sandstorm. "Stinking of Twolegs and their nests! Is that what we want as our leader?"

Sandstorm felt the familiar rage burn in his belly. Even though he had lived with the Clan since he was six moons old, Darkstripe never let him forget that he was not forestborn.

As he struggled with the desire to leap down and sink his claws into Darkstripe's fur, Tigerclaw rose to her paws and stepped forward to face the dark warrior. "You're wrong, Darkstripe," she growled. "Sandstorm has proved his loyalty to the Clan a thousand times over. No Clanborn cat could have done more."

Sandstorm blinked his thanks to her, surprised that Tigerclaw of all cats should have supported him so determinedly. She knew of Sandstorm's suspicions that her kit Squirrelpaw would end up as dangerous as his father, Goldenstar. Though he had taken Squirrelpaw as his own apprentice, he never felt comfortable around the young cat, and Tigerclaw knew it. She had defended her kits fiercely against what she thought was Sandstorm's unreasonable hostility. It was all the more surprising now that she should stand up for him against Darkstripe.

"Sandstorm, don't listen to Darkstripe," Sorreltail added his voice to Tigerclaw's. "Every cat here wants you as leader, apart from her. You're obviously the best cat for the job."

A murmur of agreement rose from the cats around the Highrock, and Sandstorm's heart swelled with gratitude.

"And who are we to go against the decrees of Starclan?" Mousefur added. "The deputy *always* becomes Clan leader. That is the tradition of the warrior code."

"Which Sandstorm seems to know rather better than *you* do." Silverstream hissed, flicking his tail contemptuously at Darkstripe. He knew as well as Sandstorm that the dark warrior had plotted with Goldenstar before the dog attack.

Sandstorm gestured with one paw to his friend for silence before addressing the whole Clan. "I promise you that I will spend the rest of my life striving to become the leader that Thunderclan deserves. And with Starclan's help I will succeed."

His gaze was drawn instinctively to Fireheart, and he felt warmth spread into his paws and the tip of his tail when he saw how proud she looked.

"As for you, Darkstripe," Sandstorm spat, unable to hide his anger, "if you don't like the thought of being led by a kittypet, you can always leave."

The dark warrior lashed her tail; there was pure hatred in the look she threw at Sandstorm. *If I had never come to the forest,* Sandstorm realized, *Goldenstar would be leader now, and you would be deputy.*

He had never intended to provoke a public confrontation with Darkstripe, but the dark tabby had driven him to it. Though Thunderclan could not afford to lose any warriors, a large part of Sandstorm wanted Darkstripe to take him at his word and leave the Clan for good. Yet at the same time he knew that Darkstripe would go straight to Shadowclan and Goldenstar. It was better, Sandstorm admitted to himself, to keep his enemies apart. Darkstripe would be less of a threat in Thunderclan, where Sandstorm could keep an eye on her.

The black-striped warrior went on staring at him for a few heartbeats more, before whipping around to stalk away. But he did not head for the gorse tunnel; instead he vanished into the warriors' den.

"Right." Sandstorm raised his voice as he turned back to the rest of the Clan. "Tonight we will hold the mourning rituals for Oakstar."

"Hang on!" Brightheart sprang to his paws, tail fluffed up. "Aren't we going to attack Shadowclan? They slaughtered Whitestorm and they led the dog pack to our camp! Don't you want revenge?"

His fur was bristling with hostility. Whitestorm had been Brightheart's foster mother when he first came to Thunderclan as a helpless kit. But Sandstorm knew that attacking Shadowclan right now was not the answer.

He signaled with his tail to silence the yowls of agreement that had broken out as soon as Brightheart spoke. "No," he meowed. "This is not the time to attack Shadowclan."

"*What*?" Brightheart stared at him disbelievingly. "You'd let them get away with it?"

Sandstorm took a deep breath. "Shadowclan didn't kill Whitestorm, or lay the trail for the dogs. Goldenstar did. Every rabbit on the trail had his scent on it and no other cat's. We can't be sure that Shadowclan even knew what their leader was planning."

Brightheart let out a snort of contempt. Sandstorm fixed his former apprentice with a hard stare, willing him not to argue about this now. He knew that what had happened was due to the moons-old enmity between himself and Goldenstar. The Shadowclan leader would have been pleased to wipe out Thunderclan and take its territory for his own, but that was not his real motive for bringing the pack of dogs to the camp. What Goldenstar wanted more than anything else was to destroy Sandstorm. Only then would he have his full revenge for the time when Sandstorm had revealed his plot to kill Oakstar and driven him into exile.

Sooner or later, Sandstorm now knew, he would have to come face to face with Goldenstar in a final confrontation that only one of them could survive. He prayed to Starclan that when the time came he would have the courage and strength to rid the forest of this bloodthirsty cat.

"Believe me," he meowed out loud, addressing the whole Clan, "Goldenstar will pay. But Thunderclan has no quarrel with Shadowclan."

To Sandstorm's relief, Brightheart sat down again, his blue eyes blazing with anger, and muttered something to Lostface. Nearby, Tigerclaw was crouched with her tail wrapped protectively around Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw, as if they were still young kits. She had made Sandstorm himself tell the young cats what Goldenstar had done, and she was always afraid that the Clan would judge them harshly because of their father's crimes. As Sandstorm gave his decision not to attack, she visibly relaxed, and the two apprentices eased away from her. Squirrelpaw flashed a look at Sandstorm from narrowed green eyes, and Sandstorm wondered if he saw hostility there.

He pushed the problem of Squirrelpaw to the back of his mind as he looked out over the assembled cats. Long shadows were stretching across the camp, and Sandstorm realized that the time has come for

the Clan to make its last farewells to their beloved leader. "We must pay our respects to Oakstar," he announced. "Are you ready, Cinderpelt?" The medicine cat nodded. "Silverstream, Fireheart," Sandstorm went on, "can you bring Oakstar's body out into the clearing so that we may share tongues with her in the sight of Starclan?"

The two warriors got up and vanished into Oakstar's den, reappearing a moment later with their leader's body supported between them. They carried her to the center of the clearing and laid her gently onto the hard-packed sand.

"Fireheart, round up a hunting patrol," Sandstorm ordered. "When you've said good-bye to Oakstar I'd like you to stock up the fresh-kill pile. And Mousefur, when you have finished, could you lead a patrol out toward Snakerocks and the Shadowclan border? I want to be sure that all the dogs have gone, and that there are no Shadowclan cats on our territory. Be careful, though—don't take risks."

"Sure, Sandstorm." The wiry brown cat got to his paws. "Tigerclaw, Longtail, are you coming?"

The cats he had named went to join him, and all three moved into the center of the clearing to share tongues with their leader for the last time. Fireheart followed with Ferncloud and Brightheart. Cinderpelt stood at Oakstar's head and gazed into the indigo sky, where the first stars of Silverpelt were beginning to appear. According to the ancient traditions of the Clans, each star represented the spirit of a warrior ancestor. Sandstorm wondered if there was one more star tonight, for Oakstar.

Cinderpelt's blue eyes shone with the secrets of Starclan. "Oakstar was a noble leader," he meowed. "Let us give thanks to Starclan for her life. She was dedicated to her Clan, and her memory will never fade from the forest. Now we commend her spirit to Starclan; may she watch over us in death as she always did in life."

A soft murmuring spread throughout the Clan as the medicine cat finished speaking and stood with his head bowed. The warriors Sandstorm had chosen to go out on patrol crouched beside Oakstar's

body, grooming her fur and pressing their noses to her flank. After a while they backed away and other cats took their places, until all the Clan had shared tongues with their leader in the sorrowful ritual.

The patrols left, and the other cats retreated silently to their dens. Sandstorm stood watching near the base of the Highrock, and as Sorreltail moved away from his leader's body he stepped forward to intercept the young warrior. "I've got a job for you," he murmured. "I want you to keep an eye on Darkstripe for me. If she so much as looks across the border to Shadowclan, I want to know about it."

The young tortoiseshell and white tom gazed at him, alarm battling with loyalty to his new Clan leader. "I'll do my best, Sandstorm, but she won't like it."

"With any luck, she won't know about it. Don't make it too obvious, and ask one or two of the others to help you... Mousefur, maybe, and Lionheart." Seeing that Sorreltail was still doubtful, Sandstorm added, "Darkstripe may not have known about the dogs, but she knew that Goldenstar was planning something. We can't trust her."

"I can see that," Sorreltail meowed, his eyes troubled. "But we can't watch her forever."

"It won't be forever," Sandstorm assured him. "Just until Darkstripe proves where her loyalties lie—one way or the other."

Sorreltail nodded, then slipped silently into the warriors' den. With no more problems clamoring for his attention, Sandstorm was able to cross the clearing to Oakstar's body. Cinderpelt still sat near her head and Brindleface was crouched beside him, his head bowed in grief.

Sandstorm dipped his head to the medicine cat. He settled himself beside Oakstar, searching her face for signs of the leader he had loved so much. But her eyes were closed, never again to burn with the fire that had commanded respect from all the Clans. Her spirit had gone to race joyously through the sky with her warrior ancestors', keeping watch over the forest.

He felt the soft caress of his leader's fur and felt a sense of security flood over him, almost as if he were a kit again, curling up close to his mother. For a moment he could almost forget the horror of her dying and the loneliness of his new responsibilities.

Receive her with honor, Sandstorm prayed silently to Starclan, closing his eyes and pressing his nose to Oakstar's fur. *And help me keep her Clan safe.*

Chapter 3

Something was prodding Sandstorm in the side. With a muffled mew of protest he opened his eyes to see Cinderpelt stooping over him.

"You dozed off," he murmured. "But you'll have to wake up now. It's time to bury Oakstar."

Sandstorm staggered to his paws. He flexed each stiff leg in turn and passed his dry tongue over his lips. He felt as if he had been crouching in the clearing for a moon at least. The sense of comfort he had felt as he slept was replaced by a wave of guilt.

"Did any cat see?" he muttered to Cinderpelt.

The medicine cat's blue eyes glimmered with sympathy. "Only me. Don't worry about it, Sandstorm. No cat would blame you after what happened yesterday."

Sandstorm glanced around the clearing. The pale light of dawn was just beginning to seep through the trees. A few tail-lengths away the elders had assembled to carry out their duty of bearing Oakstar's body to the burial place. The rest of the Clan were slowly emerging from their dens, forming two lines between Oakstar's body and the entrance to the gorse tunnel.

At a nod from Cinderpelt, the elders took up the body and carried Oakstar between the rows of her grieving warriors. Every cat lowered his head as their leader was borne past.

"Good-bye, Oakstar," Sandstorm murmured. "I'll never forget you." Sharp thorns of pain pierced his heart when he saw the tip of her tail scoring a furrow in the blackened leaves that still lay on the ground after the recent fire.

When Oakstar had vanished with her escort, the rest of the cats began to disperse. Sandstorm checked the camp, noticing with

approval that the pile of fresh-kill had been stocked up. All he needed to do was send out the dawn patrol; then he could eat and rest. He felt as if a moon of sleep would not be enough to banish the exhaustion from his paws.

"Well, Sandstorm," meowed Cinderpelt. "Are you ready?"

Sandstorm turned, puzzled. "Ready?"

"To go to the Moonstone to receive your nine lives from Starclan." The tip of Cinderpelt's tail twitched. "Sandstorm, surely you hadn't forgotten?"

Sandstorm shuffled his paws uneasily. Of course he hadn't forgotten the ancient ceremony to initiate all new Clan leaders, but somehow he hadn't realized that it would take place right away. He felt dazed by the speed with which everything was happening, bearing him forward relentlessly like the swift waters of the gorge that had almost drowned him.

Fear rose in his throat and he had to swallow quickly. No leader ever spoke of the mystic rite, so no other cat, except for the medicine cat's, knew what happened there. Sandstorm had visited the Moonstone before and watched Oakstar share tongues with Starclan in her sleep. That experience had been awe-inspiring enough. He could not imagine what would happen when he had to lie beside the sacred stone himself and share dreams with his warrior ancestors.

On top of this, he knew that Highstones, where the Moonstone lay in a cavern far underground, was a whole day's journey away, and the ritual demanded that he not eat beforehand, not even the strengthening herbs that other cats took for the journey.

"Starclan will give you strength," meowed Cinderpelt, as if he had read his thoughts.

Sandstorm muttered in vague agreement. Glancing around, he spotted Brindleface on his way to the warriors' den and summoned the older warrior with a flick of his tail.

"I've got to go to Highstones," he meowed. "Will you take charge of the camp? We'll need a dawn patrol."

"Consider it done," promised Brindleface, and added, "Starclan go with you, Sandstorm."

Sandstorm took a last look around the camp as he followed Cinderpelt toward the gorse tunnel. He felt as if he were going on a long journey, farther than he had ever traveled before, where the prospect of return looked doubtful. And in a way he never would return, for the cat who came back would have a new name, new responsibilities, and a new relationship with Starclan.

As he turned away, a yowl sounded behind him. Silverstream and Fireheart were racing across the clearing.

"You weren't sneaking off without saying good-bye?" Silverstream panted, skidding to a halt.

Fireheart said nothing, but she twined her tail with Sandstorm's and pressed close to his side.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Sandstorm meowed. "Listen," he added awkwardly, "I know things will be different now, but I'll never stop needing you—both of you. No cat ever had such good friends."

Silverstream butted him in the shoulder. "We know that, you stupid furball," he mewed.

Fireheart's green eyes shone as she gazed into Sandstorm's. "We'll always need you too, Sandstorm," she murmured. "And you'd better not forget that."

"Sandstorm, come on!" Cinderpelt called from where he was waiting at the entrance to the gorse tunnel. "We have to reach Highstones by nightfall—and remember I can't move as fast as you."

"Coming!" Sandstorm gave each of his friends a quick lick before plunging into the gorse tunnel after the medicine cat. His heart felt full of hope as he caught up to her and made his way to the top of the ravine. He might have been leaving his old life behind, but he could take with him everything that was important.

The sun was up in a clear blue sky and the frost had melted from the grass by the time the two cats reached Fourtrees, where the Gatherings were held between all four Clans every full moon.

"I hope we don't meet a Windclan patrol," Sandstorm remarked as they crossed the border onto the high, exposed moorland, leaving the shelter of the forest behind them.

Not long before, Oakstar had tried to launch an attack on Windclan, accusing them of stealing prey from Thunderclan. Sandstorm had disobeyed his leader and risked accusations of treachery to avoid a battle. Although Tallstar, the Windclan leader, had been prepared to make peace, Sandstorm could imagine that the Windclan cats might still bear a grudge.

"They won't stop us," Cinderpelt replied calmly.

"They might try," Sandstorm argued. "I'd rather avoid them altogether."

His hopes were dashed as he and Cinderpelt reached the crest of a stretch of moorland and saw a Windclan patrol picking their way through the heather a few fox-lengths below. They were downwind, so Sandstorm had not detected their scent as a warning.

The leader of the patrol raised her head, and Sandstorm recognized the warrior Tornear. His heart sank when he saw that his old enemy Mudclaw was just behind her, with an apprentice that Sandstorm didn't know. He and Cinderpelt waited as the Windclan cats bounded through the heather toward them; there was no point in trying to avoid them now.

Mudclaw curled her lip in a snarl, but Tornear dipped her head as she halted in front of Sandstorm. "Greetings, Sandstorm, Cinderpelt," she meowed. "Why are you here on our territory?"

"We're on our way to Highstones," Cinderpelt replied, taking a step forward.

Sandstorm felt a surge of pride to see the respectful nod the Windclan warrior gave to his medicine cat.

"No bad news, I hope?" Tornear asked; cats did not usually travel to highstones unless a crisis in their Clan demanded direct communication with Starclan.

"The worst," Cinderpelt meowed steadily. "Oakstar died yesterday."

All three Windclan cats bowed their heads; even Mudclaw looked solemn. "She was a great and noble cat," Tornear meowed at last. "Every Clan will honor her memory."

Raising her head again, she turned to Sandstorm with a look of curiosity and respect in her eyes. "So you're the leader now?" she asked.

"Yes," Sandstorm admitted. 'I'm going to receive my nine lives from Starclan."

Tornear nodded, her gaze traveling slowly over the warrior's sand-colored pelt. "You're young," she commented. "But something tells me you'll make a fine leader."

"Th-thank you," Sandstorm stammered, taken by surprise.

Cinderpelt rescued him. "We mustn't stay," he meowed. "It's a long way to Highstones."

"Of course." Tornear stepped back. "We'll tell Tallstar your news. May Starclan be with you!" she called as the two Thunderclan cats bounded away.

On the edge of the uplands they paused again and looked down over a very different landscape. Instead of bare hillside broken by outcrops of rock and patches of heather, Sandstorm saw a scattering of Twoleg nests among fields and hedgerows. In the distance the Thunderpath cut a swatch across the land, while beyond that jagged hills reared up, their barren slopes looking gray and threatening. Sandstorm swallowed, that desolate region was where they were heading.

He realized that Cinderpelt was looking at him with understanding in his blue eyes.

"Everything's different," Sandstorm confessed. "You saw those Windclan cats. Even they don't treat me in the same way anymore." He knew he could never say these things to anyone except the medicine cat—not even to Fireheart. 'It's as if every cat expects me to be noble and wise. But I'm not. I'll make mistakes, just like I did before. Cinderpelt, I'm not sure I can do this."

"Mouse-brain." Sandstorm was both shocked and comforted by the teasing note in Cinderpelt's voice. "When you make mistakes—not *if*, Sandstorm, *when*—I'll tell you about them, believe me." More seriously, he added, "And I'll still be your friend, no matter what. No cat that ever lived was perfect all the time. Oakstar wasn't! The trick is to learn from your mistakes, and have the courage to be true to your heart." He turned his head and rasped his tongue over his ear. "You'll be fine, Sandstorm. Now let's go."

Sandstorm let him take the led down the slope and across the Twoleg farmland. The two cats picked their way over the sticky earth of a plowed field and skirted the Twoleg nest where the two loners, Raven and Patchpaw, lived. Sandstorm kept a lookout, but there was no sign of them. He was sorry not to see them, for both cats were good friends to Thunderclan, and Patchpaw had once trained alongside Sandstorm as an apprentice. The distant barking of a dog sent shivers through Sandstorm's fur as he remembered the horror of being chased by the pack.

Keeping to the shadows of the hedges, they eventually reached the Thunderpath and crouched beside it, their fur ruffled by the wind of the monsters racing past them. The strong reek of their fumes flooded Sandstorm's nose and throat, and his eyes stung.

Cinderpelt braced himself beside him, waiting for a space between the monsters when it would be safe to cross. Sandstorm felt anxious for his friend. His leg had been permanently injured in an accident at the edge of the Thunderpath many moons ago, when he had been his apprentice, the old injury would slow him down.

"We'll go together," he meowed, feeling the familiar guilt that he had not prevented his accident. "Whenever you're ready."

Cinderpelt gave a tiny nod; Sandstorm guessed he was afraid, but

he wouldn't admit it. A moment later, after a brightly colored monster flashed past, he mewed, "Now!" and limped rapidly out onto the hard black surface.

Sandstorm bounded at his side, forcing himself not to leave him behind even though his heart was hammering and every instinct screamed at him to run across as quickly as he could. He heard the roar of a monster in the distance, but before it arrived he and the medicine cat were safe in the hedgerows on the other side.

The medicine cat let out a gusty sigh. "Thank Starclan that's over!"

Sandstorm murmured agreement, though he knew they still had to face the return journey.

Already the sun was sliding down the sky. The land on this side of the Thunderpath was less familiar to Sandstorm, and every sense was alert for danger as they began to climb toward Highstones. But all he could hear was prey scuffling in the scanty grass; the tempting scent flooded his mouth, and he wished he were allowed to stop and hunt.

As Sandstorm and Cinderpelt reached the foot of the final slope, the sun was setting behind the peak. The evening shadows were lengthening and a chill crept over the ground. Above his head, Sandstorm could make out a square opening beneath an overhang of stone.

"We've reached Mothermouth," Cinderpelt meowed. "Let's rest for a moment."

Him and Sandstorm lay down together on a flat rock while the last of the light died from the sky and the stars of Silverplet began to appear. The moon flooded all the landscape in a cold, frosty light.

"It's time," mewed Cinderpelt.

All his misgivings coursed through Sandstorm once again, and at first he thought his paws would not carry him. But he rose and began walking forward, the sharp stones biting into his pads, until he stood beneath the arch known to the Clans as Mothermouth.

A black tunnel yawned into darkness. From his previous visit Sandstorm knew that there was no point in straining his eyes to see what lay ahead; the blackness was unbroken all the way to the cavern where the Moonstones lay. As he hesitated, Cinderpelt stepped forward confidently.

"Follow my scent," he told him. "I will lead you to the Moonstone. And from now on, until the ritual is over, neither of us must speak."

"But I don't know what to do," Sandstorm protested.

"When we reach the Moonstones, lie down and press your nose to it." His blue eyes gleamed in the moonlight. "Starclan will send you to sleep so you may meet with them in dreams."

There was a forest full of questions that Sandstorm wanted to ask him, but none whose answers would help him overcome the creeping dread he felt. He bowed his head in silence and followed Cinderpelt as he made his way into the darkness.

The tunnel slipped steadily downward, and Sandstorm soon lost his sense of direction as it wound back and forth. Sometimes the walls were so close together that his fur and whiskers brushed the sides. His heart thumped wildly and he opened his mouth to draw in Cinderpelt's comforting scent, terrified at the thought that he might lose him.

At last he realized that he could see Cinderpelt's ears outlined against a faint light ahead. Other scents began to reach him, and his whiskers twitched in a flow of cold, fresh air. A heartbeat later he rounded a bend in the tunnel and the light grew suddenly stronger. Sandstorm narrowed his eyes as he padded forward, sensing that the tunnel had opened out into a cave.

High above his head, a hole in the roof showed a chink of night sky. A shaft of moonlight shone through it, falling directly onto a rock in the center of the cavern. Sandstorm drew in his breath sharply. He had seen the Moonstone once before, but he had forgotten just how startling it was. About three tail-lengths high, tapering toward its top, it reflected the moonlight in its dazzling crystal as if a star had fallen to the earth. The white light lit up the whole cave, turning

Cinderpelt's gray fur to silver.

He turned toward Sandstorm and signaled to him with his tail to take his place beside the Moonstone.

Unable to speak, even if he could think of anything to say Sandstorm obeyed. He lay down in front of the stone, settling his head on his paws so that his nose touched the smooth surface. The cold was a shock, so that he almost drew back, and for a moment he blinked at the light of stars sparkling in the depths of the stone.

Then he closed his eyes, and waited for Starclan to send him to sleep.

Chapter 4

All was darkness and cold. Sandstorm had never been so cold. He felt as if every scrap of warmth and life were being sucked out of his body. His legs twitched as painful cramps clutched at them. He imagined that he was made of ice, and if he tried to move he would shatter into a thousand brittle fragments.

But no dreams came. No sight or sound of Starclan. Only the cold and the darkness. *Something must be wrong,* Sandstorm thought, beginning to panic.

He dared to open his eyes a narrow slit. At once they flew wide with shock. Instead of the shining Moonstone in a cavern far below the ground, he saw short, well-trodden grass stretching away. Night scents flooded over him, of green, growing things moist with dew. A warm breeze ruffled his fur.

Scrambling into a sitting position, Sandstorm realized he was in the hollow at Fourtrees, near the base of the Great Rock. The towering oaks, in full leaf, rustled over his head, and Silverpelt glittered beyond them in the night sky.

How did I come here? he wondered. *Is this the dream that Cinderpelt promised?*

He raised his head and looked up at the sky. He could not remember it being so clear, Silverpelt looked closer than he had ever seen before, scarcely higher than the topmost branches of the oaks. As Sandstorm gazed at it, he realized something that sent the blood thrilling through his veins like liquid fire.

The stars were moving.

They swirled before his disbelieving eyes and began to spiral downward, toward the forest, toward Fourtrees, toward him. Sandstorm waited, his heart pounding.

And the cats of Starclan came stalking down the sky. Frost sparkled at their paws and glittered in their eyes. Their pelts were white flame. They carried the scent of ice and fire and the wild places of the night.

Sandstorm crouched before them. He could scarcely bear to go on looking, and et he could not bear to look away. He wanted to absorb this moment into every hair on his pelt so it would be his forever.

After a time that might have lasted a hundred seasons or a single heartbeat, all the cats of Starclan had come down to earth. All around Sandstorm the hollow of Fourtrees was lined with their shimmering bodies and blazing eyes. Sandstorm crouched in the center, surrounded on all sides. He began to realize that some of the starry cats, those sitting closer to him, were achingly familiar.

Oakstar! Joy pierced him like a thorn in his heart. *And Raggedpelt!* Then he drew in a familiar, sweet scent, and turned his head to see the tortoiseshell fur and gentle face that he had dreamed of so often.

Spottedleaf—oh, Spottedleaf! His beloved medicine cat had came back to him. Sandstorm wanted to spring to his paws and yowl his joy to the whole forest, but awe kept him silent, still crouching.

"Welcome, Sandstorm." The sound seemed to belong to all the cats Sandstorm had ever known, and yet at the same time it was one clear voice. "Are you ready to receive your nine lives?"

Sandstorm glanced around, but he couldn't see any cat speaking. "Yes," he replied, forcing his voice not to shake. "I'm ready."

A white cat rose to his paws and strode toward him, his head and tail high. Sandstorm recognized Frostfur, who had become Oakstar's deputy when Sandstorm was still an apprentice, and who had died soon after in a battle with Shadowclan. He had been an old cat when Sandstorm knew him, but now he looked young and strong again, his coat shining like pale snow.

"Frostfur!" Sandstorm gasped. "Is it really you?"

Frostfur did not reply. When he was close enough, he stooped and touched his nose to Sandstorm's head. It burned against him like the hottest flame and the coldest ice. Sandstorm's instinct was to shrink away, but he could not move.

"With this life I give you courage," Frostfur murmured. "Use it well in defense of your Clan."

At once a bolt of energy seared through Sandstorm like lightning, setting his fur on end and filling his senses with a deafening roar. His eyes grew dark, and his mind filled with a chaotic swirl of battles and hunts, the feeling of claws raking across fur and teeth meeting in the flesh of prey.

The pain ebbed, leaving Sandstorm weak and trembling. The darkness faded and he found himself in the unearthly clearing again. If that was one life received, he had eight more to go. *How will I bear it?* he thought in dismay.

Frostfur was already turning away, moving back to his place in the ranks of Starclan. Another cat rose and came toward Sandstorm. At first Sandstorm did not recognize her, but then he glimpsed a dark, dappled coat and bushy redtail and realized this must be Redtail. Sandstorm had never met the Thunderclan deputy, who was murdered by Goldenstar on the very day Sandstorm came to the forest as a kittypet, but he had sought out the truth about her death and used it to prove Goldenstar's treachery.

Like Frostfur, Redtail bowed her head and touched her nose to Sandstorm's. "With this life I give you justice," she mewed. "Use it well as you judge the actions of others."

Once more an agonizing spasm rushed through Sandstorm, and he had to grit his teeth to stop himself from yowling. When he recovered, panting as if he had raced all the way back to camp, he saw Redtail watching him. "Thank you," the former deputy meowed solemnly. "You revealed the truth when no other cat could."

Sandstorm managed to nod in acknowledgement as Redtail went back to sit beside Frostfur again, and a third cat emerged from the ranks.

This time Sandstorm's jaws dropped open when he recognized the beautiful dark gray cat, her coat glimmering with a silvery sheen. It was Silverstream's lost love Graystripe, the Riverclan queen who had died bearing his kits. Her paws scarcely skimmed the ground as she bent down to him.

"With this life I give you loyalty to what you know to be right," she meowed. Sandstorm wondered if she was referring to the way he had helped Silverstream to see his forbidden love, trusting to the strength of their relationship even though it went against the warrior code. "Use it well to guide your Clan in times of trouble," Graystripe urged him.

Sandstorm braced himself for another agonizing pang, but this time there was less pain as the new life rushed through him. He was aware of a warm flow of love, and realized dimly that that was what had marked out Graystripe's life—love for her Clan, for Silverstream, and for the kits she had died to give life to.

"Graystripe!" he whispered as the dark gray she-cat turned away again. "Don't go yet. Haven't you any message for Silverstream?"

But Graystripe said nothing more, only glancing back over her shoulder, her eyes filled with love and sorrow that told Sandstorm more than all the words she could ever say.

He closed his eyes, preparing himself for the next life-giving. When he looked up again, a fourth cat was approaching him. This time it was Dappletail, the Thunderclan warrior who had been killed by Goldenstar in a fight near the Thunderpath.

"With this life I give you tireless energy," he meowed as he bowed his head to touch Sandstorm. "Use it well to carry out the duties of a leader."

As the life coursed through Sandstorm he felt as if he were racing through the forest, how paws skimming the ground, his fur flattened by the wind. He knew the exhilaration of the hunt and the sheer joy of speed, and he had the feeling that he could outrun any enemy forever.

His gaze followed Dappletail as he returned to his place. When the fifth cat appeared his heart gave a leap of joy. It was Whitestorm, Brightheart's foster mother, who had been cruelly slaughtered by Goldenstar to give the dog pack a taste for cat blood.

"With this life I give you protection," she told him. "Use it well to care for your Clan as a mother cares for her kits."

Sandstorm expected this life to be gentle and loving like Graystripe's, and he wasn't ready for the bolt of ferocity that transfixed him. He felt as though all the fury of their ancient ancestors Tigerclan and Lionclan were pulsing through him, challenging any cat to harm the weaker, faceless shadows that crouched by his paws. Shocked and trembling, Sandstorm recognized a mother's desire to protect her kits, and realized how much Whitestorm had loved them all—even Brightheart, who was not her own.

I must tell him, Sandstorm thought as the fury ebbed, before he remembered that he was bound to say nothing to any cat about what he had experienced in the ritual.

Whitestorm drew back to sit with the other cats of Starclan again, and another familiar figure took her place. Guilt washed over Sandstorm as he recognized Swiftpaw.

"I'm sorry," he murmured as he looked into the apprentice's eyes. "It was my fault you died."

Angry at Oakstar's refusal to make her a warrior, and desperate to prove herself, Swiftpaw had gone out to track down whatever was preying on the cats in the forest. The dog pack had killed her, and Sandstorm knew he would blame himself forever for not trying harder to make Oakstar change her mind.

But Swiftpaw showed no anger now. Her eyes shone with a wisdom far beyond her age as she touched her nose to Sandstorm's. "With this life I give you mentoring. Use it well to train the young cats of your Clan."

The life Swiftpaw gave him was a pang of anguish so great

Sandstorm thought it would stop his heart. It ended in a jolt of pure terror, and a flash of light red as blood. Sandstorm knew he was experiencing what Swiftpaw had felt in the last moments of her life.

As it ebbed away, leaving Sandstorm gasping, he began to feel like a hollow in the ground as rain falls into it and spills over. He thought that his strength would hardly sustain him to receive lives from the three cats that were still to come.

The first was Raggedpelt. The old medicine cat had the same air of obstinate independence and courage that had impressed and frustrated Sandstorm in equal measure when she was alive. He remembered the last time he had seen her, dying in her den after the fire. Then she had been in despair, wondering if Starclan would receive her even though she had killed her own daughter, Brokentail, to put an end to her bloodthirsty plotting. Now the gleam of humor was back in her amber eyes and she stopped to touch Sandstorm.

"With this life I give you compassion," she announced. "Use it well for the elders of your Clan, and the sick, and all those weaker than yourself."

This time, even knowing the pain he would have to bear, Sandstorm closed his eyes and drank in the life hungrily, wanting all of Raggedpelt's spirit, all her courage and her loyalty to the Clan that was not hers by birth. He received it like a tide of light surging through him: her humor, her sharp tongue, her warmheartedness, and her sense of honor. He felt closer to her than ever before.

"Oh, Raggedpelt..." Sandstorm whispered, his eyes blinking open again. "I've missed you so much."

The medicine cat was already moving away. The cat who took her place was younger, stepping lightly, the sparkle of stars in his fur and in his eyes: Spottedleaf, the handsome tortoiseshell who had been Sandstorm's first love. He had come to him in dreams, but he had never seen him as plainly as this since he had been alive. He breathed in his sweet scent as he bent over him. This cat, more than any, was the one with whom he wanted to speak, because the time they had had together had been too short to let them share their

true feelings.

"Spottedleaf..."

"With this life I give you love," he murmured in his soft voice. "Use it well, for all the cats in your care—and especially for Fireheart."

There was no pain in the life that poured into Sandstorm now. It held the warmth of the high sun in greenleaf, burning to the tips of his paws. It was pure love; at the same time he experienced the sense of security he had known as a tiny kit, nuzzling his mother. He gazed up at Spottedleaf, wrapped in a contentment he had never known before.

He thought he caught a proud gleam in his eyes as he turned away, and his disappointment that he had not stayed to talk to him was mixed with relief that he approved of his new choice. Now he had no reason to fear that he was being unfaithful to Spottedleaf in his love for Fireheart.

At last Oakstar approached Sandstorm. She was not the old, defeated cat Sandstorm had known recently, her mind giving way under the stress of her Clan's troubles. This was Oakstar at the height of her strength and power, prowling toward him across the clearing like a lion. Sandstorm was almost dazzled by the glory of starlight around her, but he forced himself to meet her amber gaze squarely.

"Welcome, Sandstorm, my apprentice, my warrior, and my deputy," she greeted him. "I always knew you would make a great leader one day."

As Sandstorm bowed his head, Oakstar touched him with her nose and went on; "With this life I give you nobility and certainty and faith. Use it well as you lead your Clan in the ways of Starclan and the warrior code."

The warmth of Spottedleaf's life had lulled Sandstorm, and he was unprepared for the agony that shook him as he received Oakstar's. He shared the fierceness of her ambition, the anguish she had suffered when she gave up her kits, the ferocity of battle after battle

in the service of her Clan. He felt her terror as her mind fragmented and she lost her trust in Starclan. The rush of power grew stronger and stronger, until Sandstorm thought his pelt would never contain it. Just as he thought he must yowl his pain or die, it begins to ebb, ending in a sense of calm acceptance and joy.

A long, soft sigh passed through the clearing. All the Starclan warriors had risen to their paws. Oakstar stayed in the center of the clearing and signaled with her tail that Sandstorm should rise too. He obeyed her shakily, feeling as if the fullness of life inside him would spill over when he moved. His body felt as battered as if he had fought the hardest battle of his life, and yet his spirit soared with the strength of the lives he had been granted.

"I hail you by your new name, Sandstar," Oakstar announced. "Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and Starclan grants to you the guardianship of Thunderclan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

"Sandstar! Sandstar!" Just as the forest Clans would acclaim a new warrior by name, so the cats of Starclan acclaimed Sandstar, in rich voices that tingled in the air. "Sandstar! Sandstar!"

Suddenly the chanting broke off with a startled hiss. Sandstar tensed, aware that something was wrong. Oakstar's glowing eyes were fixed on something behind him. He spun around and let out a choking cry.

A massive hill of bones had appeared at the other side of the clearing, many tail-lengths high. It shone with an unnatural light, so that Sandstar could see each separate bone edged as if with fire—the bones of cats and the bones of prey, all jumbled together. A hot wind swept over him, bearing the reek of carrion, even though the bones gleamed white and clean.

Sandstar gazed wildly around him, seeking help or answers from the other cats. But the clearing was dark. The cats of Starclan had vanished, leaving him alone with the terrible hill of bones. As Sandstar felt panic welling up inside him, he sensed the familiar

presence of Oakstar by his side, warm fur pressed against his flank. He could not see her in the darkness, but her voice whispered in his ear.

"Something terrible is coming, Sandstar. Four will become two. Lion and tiger will meet in battle, and blood will rule the forest."

Her scent and the warmth of her fur faded away as she finished speaking.

"Wait!" Sandstar yowled. "Don't leave me! Tell me what you mean!"

But there was no reply, no explanation of the dreadful prophecy. Instead, the red light that gleamed from the hill of bones glowed brighter. Sandstar stared at it in horror. Blood had begun to ooze out between the bones. The trickles merged into a river that flowed steadily toward him, until the stench of blood clung to his fur. He tried to flee, and found his paws were fixed in place. A heartbeat later, the sticky red tide was washing around him, gurgling and reeking of death.

"No!" Sandstar yowled, but there was no response from the forest, just the steady whisper of blood lapping hungrily at his fur.

Chapter 5

Author's Note: Hey everyone! A little update about the schedule: today is my last day of work before I go on break. I return to work on January 4th so until then, uploads will be once a day every day except on Christmas! I will not upload a chapter since I will be with family. Once I return to work, we will go back to daily uploads with Tuesdays and Thursdays being 2 chapters. Happy holidays everyone!

Sandstar jolted awake in terror. He was lying in the cavern beneath Highstones with his nose pressed against the Moonstone. The shaft of moonlight had vanished, and only the faintest glimmer of starshine lit the cave. But there was no relief in waking up, for the stench of blood was still all around him and his fur felt hot and sticky.

Heart thudding wildly, Sandstar scrambled to his paws. Across the cave he could just make out Cinderpelt. He had risen too, and was signaling urgently to him with his tail. Sandstar's first impulse was to pour out to him all that he had seen, but he remembered his instructions to keep silent until they had left Mothermouth. Paws skidding on the cave floor in his haste, he pushed past the medicine cat and bolted into the tunnel.

As he stumbled upward toward the open air, following his own scent trail along the dark passage, the way seemed twice as long as before. Sandstar's fur scraped against the tunnel walls and he was filled with horror at the thought of being buried alive. The air felt too thick to breathe, and as his panic grew in the unbroken blackness of the tunnel he began to imagine that it would never end, that he would be trapped forever in blood and darkness.

Then he saw the pale outline of the tunnel entrance, and burst out into the still night air, where the moon was sinking behind thin clouds. Sandstar dug his claws into the loose earth of the hillside while shudders passed through his body from nose to tail.

A few moments later, Cinderpelt emerged behind him and pressed himself against his side until he managed to control his dreadful shivering and his breathing steadied.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"Don't you know?"

Cinderpelt shook his head. "I know that the ritual was interrupted—the scent of blood told me that. But I don't know why." He looked deep into his eyes; his own were burning with concern. "Tell me... did you receive your nine lives and your name?"

Sandstar nodded, and the medicine cat relaxed slightly. "Then the rest can wait. Let's go."

For a moment Sandstar felt too exhausted to move. But he did not want to stay anywhere near Mothermouth and the terrible things that he had seen in the cave. Shakily, pawstep by pawstep, he began to descend the hill. Cinderpelt padded beside him, sometimes nudging him toward an easier route, and Sandstar was grateful for his unquestioning presence.

As they drew farther away from the tunnel, the stench of blood faded from his mouth and nostrils. Still, Sandstar felt that even if he washed for a moon he would never get rid of the last traces from his fur. He began to feel stronger, but he was still very tired, and as soon as the rocky hillside gave way to grass he flopped down in the shelter of a hawthorn bush.

"I've got to rest," he meowed.

Cinderpelt tucked himself into the grass beside him and for a few moments the two cats shared tongues in silence. Sandstar wanted to tell the medicine cat what he had seen, but something kept him silent. Partly he wanted to protect her from the dreadful fear he had felt—even if he could explain what Oakstar's prophecy meant, would it help to have another cat look forward to the future with the dread that he now felt? And partly he hoped that if he never spoke of the dreadful vision, it might not come true. Or was there a curse on his leadership that nothing could avert? Oakstar had told

him before she died that he was the sand storm who would save the Clan. How could that be true, if the sand was drowned in the tidal wave of blood he had just seen? Sandstar had experienced prophetic dreams before, and he had learned to take them seriously. He could not ignore this, especially when it came at such a significant moment, while he was receiving his nine lives and his new name.

Cinderpelt broke into his reverie. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it yet, you know."

Sandstar pushed his muzzle into his fur, grateful for his warmth. "I'll think about it first," he mewed slowly. "Right now... it's too close." He shivered again at the memory. "Cinderpelt," he went on, "I've never told any cat this before but... sometimes I have dreams that tell me about the future."

Cinderpelt's ears twitched in surprise. "That's unusual. Clan leaders and medicine cats commune with Starclan, but I never heard of ordinary warriors having prophetic dreams. How long has this been going on?"

"Since I was a kittypet," Sandstar admitted, remembering the dream of hunting a mouse that had first driven him into the forest. "But I... I don't know if the dreams come from Starclan." After all, before he came to the forest, he hadn't even known about Starclan. Could they have been watching over him even then?

The medicine cat's eyes were thoughtful. "In the end, all dreams come from Starclan," he murmured. "Do they always come true?"

"Yes," Sandstar replied. "But not always in the way I expect. Some are easier to understand than others."

"Then you should bear that in mind when you're trying to understand this latest dream." Cinderpelt gave him a comforting lick. "Remember, Sandstar, you're not alone. Now that you're Clan leader, Starclan will share many things with you. But I'm here to help you interpret the signs. Tell me as much or as little as you want."

Though Sandstar was grateful to him for understanding,

Cinderpelt's words chilled him. His new relationship with Starclan was driving him along new paths where he might not want to go. For a few heartbeats he longed to be no more than a warrior again, hunting with Silverstream or sharing tongues with Fireheart in the den.

"Thank you, Cinderpelt," he meowed, forcing himself to his paws. "I promise I'll talk to you whenever I feel the need." But even though he meant what he said, deep down he wondered how helpful he would be. Sandstar couldn't help feeling that this was something he had to face alone. He let out a long sigh. "Let's keep going."

However much Sandstar longed to get home, his strength was failing. Since the discovery of the dog pack and the heart-stopping dash through the forest to lead them to the gorge, he had eaten little, and scarcely slept except to dream. The long journey to Highstones and the agony of receiving his nine lives, followed by the terrible vision, had taken all he had to give.

His steps became slower and more uncertain. They were passing Raven's farm when the medicine cat gave his shoulder a sharp nudge. "That's enough, Sandstar," he meowed firmly. "As your medicine cat I'm telling you that you need to rest. Let's see if Raven and Patchpaw are at home."

"Good idea." Sandstar felt too relieved at the prospect of resting to argue.

Cautiously the two cats approached the Twoleg barn. Sandstar was worried that the dogs might be unchained, but their scent was faint and distant. Much stronger was the scent of cats, and as they drew closer Sandstar spotted a muscular black she-cat squeezing herself through a gap in the door.

"Raven!" he meowed in greeting. "It's good to see you. You know Cinderpelt, our medicine cat?"

Raven gave both cats a brisk nod. "It's good to see you, too, Sandstorm."

"Sand*star*," Cinderpelt corrected her. "He's Clan leader now."

Raven's eyes widened in astonishment. "Congratulations! But that means that Oakstar must be dead. I'm sorry."

"She died as she lived, protecting her Clan," Sandstar told her.

"I can see there's a story to tell," meowed Raven, turning back to the barn, "and Patchpaw will want to hear it. Come on in."

Inside the barn was warm and dark, full of the scent of hay and mice. Sandstar listened to the telltale scuttering noises and his head spun with hunger.

"A soft place to sleep, and all the prey you can eat," he remarked, trying not to let his desperate hunger show. "Better not tell Thunderclan or they'll all be out here, wanting to be loners."

Raven chuckled softly. "Patchpaw," she called, "come and see who's here."

A black and white shape sprang down from a nearby stack of hay with a welcoming purr. As an apprentice, Patchpaw had been the only cat in Thunderclan who knew the truth about the death of Redtail—that she had been murdered by Patchpaw's mentor, Goldenstar. When Goldenstar tried to kill his apprentice to prevent her from reporting what she had seen, Sandstar had found this new home for her. The life of a loner suited Patchpaw much better than that of a warrior, yet she had never forgotten her birth Clan, and remained a loyal friend to her former Clanmates.

"So Oakstar is dead," he murmured when Raven had passed on the news. Her eyes clouded with grief. "I'll never forget her."

Raven gave a comforting rumble in her throat, and Sandstar sensed how welcoming she must have been to the scared young apprentice who had come to her so many moons ago.

Straightening up, Patchpaw flashed the black cat a grateful glance. "So you're Clan leader now," she continued to Sandstar. "Starclan made a good choice." She led the way to the other side of the barn. "Would you like to hunt?"

"That would be great," replied Cinderpelt. He gave Sandstar a

questioning look, and murmured, "Shall I catch something for you?"

In spite of his exhaustion, Sandstar shook his head. A fine Clan leader he would make if he couldn't catch his own prey! He stood alert, listening, and dropped into the hunter's crouch when he heard a soft scuffling deep within the hay. Pinpointing the mouse by hearing rather than sight, he sprang, and dispatched the creature with a swift bite.

Patchpaw was lucky, Sandstar reflected as he picked up the prey in his jaws and padded back to the others to eat. This was twice the size of the leaf-bare thin mice in the forest, and easier to catch in the shadows of the barn. He gulped it down in a few famished mouthfuls and felt his strength beginning to return.

"Have some more," Patchpaw urged. "There are plenty here."

When Sandstar and Cinderpelt had eaten as much as they could manage they lay in the soft hay, sharing tongues with their friends and bringing them up to date with Clan news. Patchpaw and Raven listened, their eyes huge with shock, as Sandstar told them about the dog pack.

"I always knew Goldenstar was bloodthirsty," Patchpaw meowed, "but I didn't think even he would try to destroy a whole Clan like that."

"Thank Starclan he didn't succeed," Sandstar replied. "But he came pretty close. I don't want to go through anything like that again."

"You'll have to do something to stop Goldenstar now, before he tries something else," Raven pointed out.

Sandstar nodded. He hesitated, then confessed. "But I don't know how I'm going to do anything without Oakstar. Everything seems dark and... and overwhelming." He said nothing about the interruption of his leadership ritual, or the horror of his dream, but he saw from the sympathetic look in Cinderpelt's eyes that he knew what he was thinking.

"Remember the whole Clan is behind you," he mewed. "No cat will

ever forget that you and Oakstar saved us from the pack."

"Maybe they expect too much of me."

"Nonsense!" Cinderpelt's tone was bracing. "They know you're going to be a great leader, and they'll all stand by you to the last breath."

"So will I," Patchpaw offered, startling Sandstar. The sleek black and white she-cat looked slightly embarrassed as Sandstar turned to look at her, but she went on: "I know I'm not a warrior, but if you want my help you have only to ask."

Sandstar blinked his gratitude. "Thank you, Patchpaw."

"May I come to the camp soon?" Patchpaw asked. "I'd like to pay my last respects to Oakstar at her burial place."

"Yes, of course," Sandstar replied. "Oakstar gave you the right to go where you like on Thunderclan territory. There's no reason to change that now."

Patchpaw dipped her head. "Thank you." As she looked up again, Sandstar saw a glow of respect in her eyes. "You saved my life once, Sandstar. I'll never be able to repay you for that. But if trouble with Goldenstar comes, I'll be proud to stand with the warriors of Thunderclan and fight him to the death."

Chapter 6

Twilight was thickening the shadows under the trees by the time Sandstar and Cinderpelt slipped down the ravine toward the camp entrance. They had slept in the barn with Raven and Patchpaw until the sun was well above the horizon, and feasted again on plump mice before they set off for their own territory. Though Sandstar was tired, some of the horror of his dream was fading, and he was looking forward to seeing his Clanmates again.

At first the new leader emerged unnoticed from the gorse tunnel with Cinderpelt. Brindleface and Sorreltail were sitting together near the nettle patch, finishing off some fresh-kill, while three apprentices wrestled playfully outside their den. Sandstar picked out the dark ginger pelt of his own apprentice, Squirrelpaw, and reminded himself to get him back onto a strict training schedule as soon as he could. There was no reason why leadership duties should prevent him from mentoring the young cat—after all, Oakstar had been a diligent mentor to him.

He was padding over to Brindleface when he heard his name yowled loudly, and turned to see Ashpaw racing across the clearing from the elders' den. The apprentice's flecked pale gray fur was bristling with excitement. "Sandstorm—no, Sandstar! You're back!"

Her noisy greeting alerted the rest of the Clan and soon they were pressing around Sandstar, calling him by his new name and welcoming him home. Sandstar wanted to give himself up to the uncomplicated enjoyment of their warm fur pressed against his, but he could not ignore the awe in their eyes as they gazed at him. He felt a sharp pang in his heart as he was reminded yet again of the new distance between himself and the rest of his Clan.

"Did you really see Starclan?" asked Dustpaw, her eyes wide.

"I really did," Sandstar replied. "But I'm not allowed to say anything about the ceremony."

Dustpaw didn't look disappointed. Her eyes brimming with admiration, she turned to Ferncloud and meowed, "I bet he's going to be a great leader!"

"He'd better be," replied Ferncloud; his love for Dustpaw wouldn't let him argue with her, even though Sandstar was well aware that he had never been Ferncloud's favorite cat. But the flecked pale gray warrior gave him a nod of respect, and Sandstar knew that Ferncloud's loyalty to the warrior code would ensure his support.

"It's good to see you back," meowed Silverstream, shouldering through the warriors to reach Sandstar's side. At least he seemed to have recovered from the awe he'd felt when Oakstar had named Sandstar leader as she lay dying. Now his blue eyes were filled with friendship and sympathy. "You look like a fox that's been dead for a moon. Was it tough?"

"It was," Sandstar murmured, just for Silverstream's ears, but Brightheart caught what he had said.

"It's only your belief in ancient traditions that makes you think you can't be a leader without dragging all the way up to Highstones and back. As far as I'm concerned, you've already proved yourself to be the true leader of this Clan, Sandstar."

Sandstar gave his kin a hard stare; he was grateful for Brightheart's loyalty and respect, but felt as frustrated as ever that the younger cat did not share his beliefs. He wished he could tell the white and ginger warrior exactly what he had experienced, if only to shock him into respect for Starclan, but he knew that was impossible.

"Shh! The ancient traditions still matter." The quiet rebuke came from Lostface, who had come to join Brightheart. She licked his ear and added, "Starclan watch over us all."

Brightheart returned the lick, his tongue passing gently over the injured side of Lostface's face. Sandstar's annoyance faded. He couldn't help admiring Brightheart's unwavering devotion to Lostface in spite of her terrible injuries. His kin might be difficult and hotheaded, with little respect for the warrior code, but he had brought this young cat back from the brink of death and given her a

reason to live.

As the welcoming cats began to disperse, Sandstar caught the eye of Brindleface, who had greeted him and then backed off a pace or two, waiting to speak.

"How are things in camp?" Sandstar asked. "Was there any trouble while I was away?"

"Not a thing," the senior warrior reported. "We've patrolled the whole territory, and there's no sign of dogs or of Shadowclan."

"Good," Sandstar mewed. Glancing at the well-stocked fresh-kill pile, he added, "I see some cats have been hunting."

Fireheart took a patrol out, and Mousefur and Sorreltail put the apprentices to work," replied Brindleface. "Squirrelpaw is a skillful hunter. I lost count of how much prey he brought in."

"Good," Sandstar repeated. His pleasure in hearing his apprentice praised was tempered by the uneasiness he always felt when Goldenstar's son was mentioned. Goldenstar had been a good hunter too, but that had not stopped him from becoming a murderer and a traitor.

Cinderpelt came up to him again. "I'm off to my den," he meowed. "Call me if you want anything. Have you remembered that you need to appoint a deputy before moonhigh?"

Sandstar nodded. Other duties have been more urgent, but now he needed to give this decision serious thought. Because she had been so shocked by Goldenstar's treachery and exile, Oakstar had made Sandstar's own appointment a day late, without the proper ceremony. The Clan had been terrified that Starclan would be angry, and that had made things very difficult for Sandstar. He was determined not to make the same mistake with his own deputy.

Watching Cinderpelt limping across the clearing to his den, Sandstar realized that so far two cats had not come to greet him. One was Darkstripe; that did not surprise him. The other was Fireheart, and that disturbed him. Had he done something to make

her angry?

Then Sandstar spotted her a few tail-lengths away, watching him with an uncharacteristically diffident air. Her green eyes flickered toward him and away again as he padded over to her.

"Fireheart," he mewed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Sandstar." She didn't meet his gaze, but looked down at her paws. "It's good to have you back."

Now Sandstar was certain something was wrong. He had been looking forward all the long journey home to lying beside Fireheart in the warriors' den, to sharing tongues with her and catching up on her news. But he would not be able to do that again. From now on he would sleep alone in Oakstar's old den—his den now—underneath the Highrock.

And with that realization came understanding of what was troubling Fireheart. For all her confidence when he left the camp, she was not at ease with him now. "Mouse-brain," he purred affectionately, pressing his muzzle against hers. "I'm still the same cat. Nothing has changed."

"Everything's changed!" Fireheart insisted. "You're Clan leader now."

"And you're still the best hunter and the most beautiful cat in the Clan," Sandstar assured her. "You'll always be special to me."

"But you... you're so far away," mewed Fireheart, unconsciously echoing Sandstar's own fears. "You're closer to Cinderpelt now than anyone else. You both know secrets about Starclan that ordinary warriors don't."

"Cinderpelt's our medicine cat," Sandstar replied. "And he's one of the best friends I have. But he's not you, Fireheart. I know things are difficult right now. There's so much I have to do to take over the Clan... especially after what Goldenstar tried to do with the pack of dogs. But in a few days we'll be able to go out on patrol together, just like we used to."

To his relief he felt Fireheart relax, and some of the uncertainty

faded from her eyes. "You'll need an evening patrol," she mewed. Her voice was crisp. More like the old Fireheart, though Sandstar guessed she was covering up her unhappiness. "Shall I round up some cats and go?"

"Good idea." Sandstar tried to match her businesslike manner. "Go and have a sniff around Sunningrocks. Make sure Riverclan hasn't been up to its old tricks." It would be just like Leopardstar, the ambitious leader of Riverclan, to try to claim the long-disputed territory while Thunderclan was shaken by the loss of Oakstar.

"Right." Fireheart hurried off toward the nettle patch, where Sorreltail and Longtail were eating. Sorreltail called to his apprentice, Rowanpaw, and all four cats headed for the gorse tunnel.

Sandstar made his way toward the leader's den. He still couldn't think of it as his own, and he found himself missing his comfy patch of moss in the warriors' den even more sharply. Before he reached it, he heard his name being called and turned to see Silverstream hurrying after him.

"Sandstar, I wanted to tell you—" He broke off as if he was embarrassed.

"What's the problem?"

"Well..." Silverstream hesitated and then went on in a rush: "I don't know if you were thinking of choosing me to be your deputy, but I wanted to say that you don't have to. I know I haven't been back in the Clan long enough, and some cats still don't trust me. I won't be hurt if you pick another cat."

Sandstar felt a pang of regret. He would have chosen Silverstream above all other cats to hunt and fight by his side, and to give him the special support that a deputy gave the Clan leader. But it was true that he could not choose Silverstream so soon after his friend's return from Riverclan. Though Sandstar himself had no doubt of his friend's loyalty to Thunderclan, Silverstream still had to prove himself before the rest of the Clan would accept him.

Leaning forward, Sandstar touched noses with his friend. "Thank you, Silverstream," he mewed. "I'm glad you understand."

Silverstream shrugged, more embarrassed than ever. "I just wanted to say." He turned and vanished through the branches of the warrior's den.

Sandstar felt choked with emotion and shook himself briskly. Padding around the Highrock to the den entrance, he heard movement inside. Blossompaw, the oldest apprentice, whirled around as Sandstar went in.

"Oh Sandstar!" he exclaimed. "Brindleface told me to fetch you some new bedding—and some fresh-kill." He flicked his tail to the far side of the den, where a rabbit lay beside a thick pile of moss and heather.

"That looks great, Blossompaw," Sandstar meowed. "Thank you—and thank Brindleface for me."

The tortoiseshell and white apprentice dipped his head and started to leave, only to halt as Sandstar called him back.

"Remind Mousefur to have a word with me tomorrow," Sandstar mewed, naming Blossompaw's mentor. "It's about time we started thinking about your warrior ceremony." *It's long overdue,* he reflected. Blossompaw had proved himself an able apprentice, and would have been a warrior moons ago but for Oakstar's reluctance to trust any of her Clan. He was the only one left of the group that had included Swiftpaw and Lostface, neither of whom would ever experience a warrior ceremony.

Blossompaw's eyes lit up with excitement. "Yes, Sandstar! Thanks!" he meowed, and dashed off.

Sandstar settled himself in the mossy nest and took a few mouthfuls of the rabbit. It had been thoughtful of Brindleface to have the bedding changed, though Sandstar still felt that Oakstar's scent lingered in the very walls of the den. Perhaps it always would, and that was no bad thing. There was pain in his memories of her, but comfort too, when he thought of her wisdom and her courage in

leading her Clan.

Shadows gathered around him as the last of the light died. Sandstar was acutely conscious of being completely alone for the first time since joining the Clan: no warmth of other cats sleeping close by, no soft meows and purrs as his friends shared tongues, no gentle snoring or the sound of cats shifting in their dreams. For a few heartbeats he felt lonelier than ever.

Then he told himself to stop being so mouse-brained. He had an important decision to make, and it was vital for Thunderclan that he got it right. His choice of deputy would affect the life of the Clan for seasons to come.

Settling deeper into the moss, he wondered whether he ought to sleep now, and ask Spottedleaf in a dream which cat would be the right deputy. He closed his eyes and almost at once he caught a trace of Spottedleaf's sweet scent. But no vision came; he could see only darkness.

Then he heard a whisper in his ear, filled with Spottedleaf's gentle teasing. "Oh, no, Sandstar. This is *your* decision."

Sighing, Sandstar opened his eyes again. "All right, Spottedleaf," he mewed aloud. "I'll decide."

The deputy could not be Silverstream, that was clear, and Sandstar was grateful to his friend for making that part of his choice easy for him. He let his mind drift over the other possible cats. The new deputy would have to be experienced, and a cat whose loyalty had never been questioned. Fireheart was brave and intelligent, and choosing her would reassure her more than anything else that Sandstar still valued her and wanted her at his side.

But that was not the right reason to choose a deputy. Besides, the warrior code dictated that no cat could be a deputy without having been a mentor first. Fireheart had never had an apprentice, so Sandstar could not choose her. With a prickle of shame, he recognized that that was his own fault, because he had given Rowanpaw to Sorreltail to mentor, even though Fireheart had been the obvious choice. He had done it to protect her, afraid that the

mentors of Goldenstar's kits would be in danger from their bloodthirsty father. It had taken Fireheart a long time to forgive him, and Sandstar hoped she would never realize that his previous mistake had prevented her from being deputy now.

But was Fireheart really the right choice anyway? Surely there was on cat who towered over all the other possibilities? Brindleface was experienced, wise, and brave. When Sandstar had been made deputy, he had shown not a scrap of the resentment that a lesser cat might have felt. He had supported him from the beginning, and he was the cat Sandstar naturally turned to when he needed advice. He was old, yes, but still strong and active. There were a good few moons left before he would be joining the elders in their den.

Oakstar would approve, too, for the pale gray tabby warrior's friendship had meant a great deal to her in her last moons.

Yes, Sandstar thought. *Brindleface will be the new deputy.* He stretched in satisfaction. All that remained was to announce the decision to the Clan.

Sandstar waited for a while, finishing the rabbit, drowsing but not letting himself fall into deep sleep in case he missed moonhigh. Silver light seeped into the den as the moon rose. Eventually he got to his paws, shook the scraps of moss from his fur, and padded out into the clearing.

Several of the Clan were pacing among the ferns at the edge, obviously waiting for the announcement, Fireheart and the evening patrol had returned and were eating their share of the fresh-kill. Sandstar flicked his tail in greeting to the flame-colored she-cat, but did not go over to speak to her. Instead he sprang up onto the Highrock and yowled, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting."

His summons was still ringing in the air when more cats began to appear, slipping from the shelter of their dens or padding into the moonlight from the shadows around the edges of the camp. Sandstar saw Darkstripe stalk into the open and sit a few tail-lengths away from the rock, her tail wrapped around her paws and a scornful look in her eyes. Unobtrusively, Sorreltail followed her

and took up a position close by.

Squirrelpaw emerged from the apprentices' den; Sandstar couldn't help wondering if he would go over to Darkstripe, but he stayed with his sister, Rowanpaw, near the edge of the gathering crowd. The eyes of both apprentices were watchful, flicking back and forth. As Mousefur walked past them he snapped at Rowanpaw, and the younger she-cat turned her head away sharply, as if she and Mousefur disagreed over something. Rowanpaw was bright and very confident, Sandstar reflected; he wouldn't be surprised if she offended the experienced warriors now and then.

Fireheart and Silverstream were sitting together near the rock, close to Brightheart and Lostface, and the elders all came out in a group and settled down in the center of the clearing.

Sandstar saw Brindleface strolling over from the nettle patch with Cinderpelt. There was no air of anticipation about him as he stopped for a quick word with Dustpaw and Ashpaw before taking his own place beside the Highrock.

Swallowing his nervousness, Sandstar began. "The time has come to appoint a new deputy." Pausing, he felt the presence of Oakstar very close to him as he remembered the ritual words she used to speak. "I say these words before Starclan," he continued, "that the spirits of our ancestors may hear and approve my choice."

By now all the cats had turned their faces up to him; he looked down at their eyes gleaming in the moonlight and could almost taste their excitement.

"Brindleface will be the new deputy of Thunderclan," he announced.

For a heartbeat there was silence. Brindleface was blinking up at Sandstar, a look of pleasure and surprise spreading over his face. Sandstar realized that the surprise was part of what he liked so much about the old warrior; Brindleface had never assumed that he would be the one chosen.

Slowly he rose to his paws. "Sandstar, cats of Thunderclan," he meowed, "I never expected to be given this honor. I swear by

Starclan that I will do all I can to serve you."

As he finished speaking, sound gradually swelled from the assembled cats, a mixture of yowls and purrs and voices calling, "Brindleface!" All the Clan began to press around the pale gray tabby warrior, congratulating him. Sandstar knew that he had made a very popular choice.

For a few moments he remained on the Highrock and watched. A new feeling of optimism surged through his paws, filling him with confidence and warmth. He had his nine lives; he had the best deputy a cat could wish for; and he had a team of warriors who were ready to face anything. The threat of the pack was over: Sandstar had to believe that soon they would be able to drive Goldenstar out of the forest for good.

Then, just as he was poised to leap down and offer his own good wishes to Brindleface, he caught sight of Darkstripe. She alone of all the cats had not moved or spoken. She was staring up at Sandstar, and her eyes burned with cold fire.

Sandstar was instantly reminded of the dreadful vision in the ceremony, the hill of bones, and the tide of blood that had flowed from it. Oakstar's words rang in his ears again: *Four will become two. Lion and tiger will meet in battle, and blood will rule the forest.*

Sandstar still did not know what the prophecy meant, but the words were laden with doom. There would be battle and bloodshed. And in Darkstripe's malignant stare, Sandstar seemed to see the first cloud that would eventually unleash the storm of war.

Chapter 7

A raw, damp cold pushed its way through Sandstar's fur as he padded through Tallpines. The sky was heavy with gray cloud and seemed undecided between sending rain or snow onto the forest. Here, where the ravages of the fire had been worst, ash still covered the ground, and the few plants that had begun to grow back had shriveled again with the coming of leaf-bare.

It was the day after his announcement to the Clan, and Sandstar had left his new deputy in charge of the camp while he patrolled the border alone. He wanted some time by himself, to get used to being leader and to think about what lay ahead. Sometimes he felt he would burst with the pride of being chosen by Starclan to lead Thunderclan, but he also knew it would not be easy. Grief for Oakstar was a dull ache that would stay with him forever. And he was afraid of what Goldenstar might do next. Sandstar could not be comforted, as the other cats were, by the absence of any traces of Shadowclan in their territory. He knew Goldenstar would not rest until he had brought his enemy down—and news that Sandstar was now the leader of Thunderclan would only fuel the fires of his revenge.

Sandstar emerged from the trees near Twolegplace and looked up at Olive's fence to see if his sister had ventured out of her Twoleg nest. But there was no sign of her, and when he drank in the air he caught only a faint scent. Padding along the edge of the trees, Sandstar came to a part of the first he rarely visited, and recognized the Twoleg nest where he himself had lived as a kittypet, so many moons ago. Overcome by curiosity, he darted across the stretch of open ground at the edge of the trees and leaped to the top of the fence.

Memories of playing there as a kit flooded over him as he looked down at the stretch of grass bordered by Twoleg plants. There was a more recent memory, too, of coming here to find catnip when

Oakstar was ill with greencough. Sandstar could see the clump of catnip now from where he was sitting, and smell its tempting scent.

A flicker of movement from the nest caught his gaze, and he saw one of his old Twolegs pass by the window and disappear again. Sandstar suddenly wondered how his Twolegs had felt when he left them to live in the forest. He hoped they hadn't worried about him. They had cared for him well, in the way that Twolegs tried to, and Sandstar knew he would always be grateful. He would have liked to tell them how happy he was in the forest, and how he was fulfilling the destiny Starclan had laid out for him, but he knew there was no way he could make Twolegs understand.

He was bunching his muscles, ready to leap down into the forest, when something black and white moved in the next garden. Glancing down, he saw Dottie, his old friend from his kittypet days. She looked as plump as ever, with a contented expression on her broad face. She was talking to a handsome brown tabby tom, a stranger to Sandstar; their mews reached him but they were too far away for him to make out the words.

He almost jumped down to say hello, until he remembered that they would probably be frightened by the sight of a ruffian like himself. Not long after coming to the forest, Sandstar had met Dottie in the woods, and nearly scared the life out of her before his friend recognized him. The life he led now was worlds away from theirs.

The sound of a door opening roused Sandstar from his thoughts, and he edged along the fence into the shelter of a holly bush as one of his old Twolegs came out of the house and called. At once the handsome brown tabby meowed good-bye to Dottie and scrambled under the fence that divided the gardens. He ran up to the Twoleg, who scooped him up and stroked him before carrying him indoors, purring loudly.

He's their new kittypet! Sandstar thought. The closing of the door stirred a pang of envy in him, just for a heartbeat. The little tabby would have no need to catch his prey before he could eat; he would have a warm place to sleep, and no risk of dying in battle or from one of the many dangers that beset the forest cats. He would have

the friendship of Dottie and other kittypets, and the care of his Twolegs—everything that Sandstar had turned his back on to live as a Clan cat in the forest.

But at the same time he would never know the satisfaction of learning warrior skills, or of racing into battle beside his friends. He would never understand what it meant to live by the warrior code, and to follow the will of Starclan.

If I could relive my life, Sandstar thought, *I wouldn't change a thing.*

Suddenly claws scrabbled on the fence below him and from the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of quick, dark ginger movement. Turning his head, he found himself face to face with Squirrelpaw.

It was a moment before Sandstar recovered himself enough to speak. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I followed you from camp, Sandstar. I... I was curious about where you were going, and I wanted to practice my tracking skills."

"Well, they seem good enough, if you got this far." Sandstar wasn't sure whether he was angry with his apprentice or not. Squirrelpaw shouldn't have followed him without permission, but it *was* impressive to have tracked him all the way from the camp. He felt a twinge of guilt, too, that Squirrelpaw should have caught him looking over a Twoleg fence at a pair of kittypets. Once before, when Sandstar was an apprentice, Goldenstar had spied on him and caught him talking to Dottie. The huge tabby had reported straight back to Oakstar, deliberately calling into question Sandstar's loyalty to Clan life.

Meeting Squirrelpaw's eyes, Sandstar saw the young cat's nervousness fading, to be replaced by a steady gaze, as if he were weighing his mentor up. It was a long, intelligent look, and Sandstar realized that he could see respect in the green depths. He was aware yet again of his certainty that Squirrelpaw could be an outstanding warrior, if only he could escape his father's dark heritage. But would Squirrelpaw ever be truly loyal to his birth Clan, with his father still in the forest?

"Can I trust you?" Sandstar blurted out suddenly.

The young cat didn't rush to defend himself. Instead Squirrelpaw held him with that serious gaze for a moment more. "Can *I* trust *you*?" he responded, twitching his ears in the direction of the Twoleg garden.

Bristling, Sandstar initially had no intention of justifying himself to his apprentice; it was not Squirrelpaw's place to question the actions of his mentor—who also happened to be Clan leader. But in spite of the guilt Squirrelpaw's question had provoked, Sandstar couldn't help admiring the spirit that had dared to ask.

He took a deep breath. "You *can* trust me," he promised solemnly. "I choose to leave my life as a kittypet. Whatever happens, I'll always put the Clan first." It was time, he decided, to be more open with Squirrelpaw. "But I do come here now and again," he continued. "I see my sister sometimes, and I wonder how things would have been if I'd stayed. Yet I always leave knowing that my heart lies with Thunderclan."

Squirrelpaw gave a little node, as if the answer satisfied him. "I know what it's like to have loyalties questioned," he meowed.

Another pang of guilt stabbed Sandstar, even though he knew he was not the only cat to have suspicions about Squirrelpaw. "How do you get on with the other apprentices?" he asked.

"They're okay. But I know some of the warriors don't like me and Rowanpaw, because Goldenstar's our father."

The words were spoken with such understanding that Sandstar was even more ashamed of himself. *We're more alike than I ever realized,* Sandstar thought. *Constantly having to prove our loyalties by fighting twice as hard, defending ourselves twice as much to our enemies—and to our Clanmates.*

"Can you cope with that?" he meowed cautiously.

Squirrelpaw blinked. "I know where my loyalties lie. I'll prove that someday."

There was no boasting in the way he spoke, just calm determination. Sandstar realized that he believed him. His apprentice had rewarded him for his honesty about visiting Twolegplace by being honest with him in return. Now, Sandstar knew he owed it to Squirrelpaw to trust his word.

"What about Rowanpaw?" he asked.

"Well..." Her brother hesitated, a troubled look in his eyes. "She can be a bit difficult at times—but it's just her way. She's a loyal cat at heart."

"I'm sure she is," Sandstar mewed, though he noticed that Squirrelpaw wasn't entirely at ease discussing his sister with the Clan leader. He would need to keep a closer eye on Rowanpaw in the future, and make sure she had all the support she needed to become a reliable Thunderclan warrior. A word with her mentor, Sorreltail, would be a good idea.

Struck by a sudden warmth toward his apprentice, Sandstar added, "I've got to get on if I'm to finish patrolling the border before dark. Do you want to come with me?"

Squirrelpaw's green eyes lit up. "Can I?"

"Sure." Sandstar leaped down from the fence and waited for the young cat to scramble down behind him. "We'll do some training on the way."

"Great!" Squirrelpaw meowed enthusiastically.

He padded close to his mentor's shoulder as Sandstar led the way back into the trees.

Sandstar halted on the edge of the Thunderpath and drew in the scent that flowed across from Shadowclan territory. *Goldenstar is out there,* he thought. *What is he planning? What will he do next?*

As he stood wrapped in silent apprehension, he noticed scraps of white drifting down from the sky. *Snow!* Sandstar thought, glancing up at the sky where the clouds were darker than ever. Hearing a surprised squeak from Squirrelpaw, he turned around. A snowflake

had landed on Squirrelpaw's nose and was slowly melting. The apprentice flicked out a pink tongue and licked it off, his green eyes round with wonder.

"What is it, Sandstar?" he asked. "It's *cold*!"

Sandstar let out a purr of amusement. "It's snow," he replied. "It comes in leaf-bare. If it goes on like this, the flakes will cover all the ground and the trees."

"Really? But they're so tiny!"

"There will be lots of them, though."

The flakes were already growing larger and falling more thickly, almost hiding the trees on the other side of the Thunderpath and smothering the Shadowclan scent. Even the roar of the monsters was muffled and they moved slowly, as if their glowing eyes couldn't see well through the snow.

Sandstar knew that snowfall would bring more problems to the forest. Prey would die in the cold, or huddle deep in holes where hunters could not follow. It would be harder than ever to feed the Clan.

His apprentice was watching the falling flakes with wide eyes. Sandstar saw him reach out one paw tentatively to dab at one of them. A heartbeat later he was leaping and whirling with high-pitched mews of excitement, as if he were trying to catch every single flake before it reached the ground.

Sandstar was surprised by a rush of affection. It was good to see the young cat playing like a kit again. Surely the dark-hearted Goldenstar had never chased snowflakes just for the joy of it? Or if he had, when had he lost the joy, and begun to care only for his own power?

There was no answer to that question, and Sandstar knew that for Sandstar, just as much as for himself, there was no going back. Their paws were firmly on the path Starclan had decided they should follow, and sooner or later the two leaders must meet to

decide who should remain in the forest.

Chapter 8

The snow had stopped by the time Sandstar and Squirrelpaw returned to camp. The clouds had cleared away and the setting sun cast long blue shadows over the thin coating of white that powdered the ground. Both cats were carrying fresh-kill; Sandstar had watched his apprentice's hunting skills and been impressed by the young cat's concentration and skillful stalking.

They had just reached the top of the ravine when they heard a yowl behind them. Sandstar turned to see Silverstream bounding through the undergrowth.

"Hi," panted the silver tabby warrior as he caught up with them. His eyes widened when he saw their catch. "You've had better luck than me. I couldn't find so much as a mouse."

Sandstar grunted sympathetically as he led the way toward the gorse tunnel. He noticed that Brackenkit, the most adventurous of Willowpelt's three kits, had left the camp and climbed halfway up the steep slope farther along the ravine. To Sandstar's surprise, she was with Darkstripe; the warrior was bending over he, saying something to her.

"Odd," Sandstar muttered through a mouthful of squirrel fur, half to himself. "Darkstripe has never shown much interest in kits before. And what's she doing out here on her own?"

Suddenly Sandstar heard a sharp exclamation from Silverstream and his friend flashed past him, hurtling along the side of the ravine, his paws scrabbling against the loose snow-covered stones. At the same moment Brackenkit's legs crumpled underneath her sturdy golden brown tabby body and she started writhing in the snow. Sandstar dropped his fresh-kill in amazement as Silverstream yowled, "No!" and flung himself on the dark warrior. Darkstripe clawed and flailed at him with her hind legs, but Silverstream's teeth were sunk in her throat and would not let go.

"What—?" Sandstar dashed down the slope with Squirrelpaw right behind him. He dodged the fighting cats, still locked together in a whirlwind of teeth and claws, and reached Brackenkit's side.

The little kit twisted and turned on the ground, her eyes wide and glazed. She was letting out high-pitched moans of pain, and there was foam on her lips.

"Get Cinderpelt!" Sandstar ordered Squirrelpaw.

His apprentice shot off, his paws sending up puffs of snow. Sandstar bent over the young kit and placed a paw gently on her belly. "It's all right," he murmured. "Cinderpelt is coming."

Brackenkit's jaws gaped wide and Sandstar caught a glimpse of half-chewed berries in her mouth, scarlet against her white teeth.

"Deathberries!" He gasped.

There was a dark-leaved shrub growing from a crack in the rock just above his head, with more of the lethal scarlet berries clustered among the leaves. He remembered a time many moons ago when Cinderpelt had appeared just in time to stop Brightheart from eating the deathberries, and warned him of how poisonous they were. Later, Raggedpelt had used them to kill her daughter, Brokentail; Sandstar had seen for himself how quickly and fatally they worked.

Crouching over Brackenkit, Sandstar did his best to scoop the crushed berries out of her mouth, but the kit was in too much terror and pain to keep still and make his task easier. Her head thrashed from side to side, and her body was convulsing in regular spasms that to Sandstar's horror seemed to be growing weaker. He could still hear Silverstream and Darkstripe screeching in the throes of their fight, but the seemed oddly far away. All his attention was concentrated on the kit.

Then to his relief he felt Cinderpelt arrive beside him. "Deathberries!" he told him quickly. "I've tried to get them out, but..."

Cinderpelt took his place by the kit's side. He had a bundle of leaves

in his mouth; setting them down, he mewed, "Good. Keep holding her, Sandstar, while I take a look."

With two of them to help, and the kit's struggles definitely growing weaker, Cinderpelt was soon able to paw out the remains of the deathberries. Then he rapidly chewed up on of his leaves and stuffed the pulp into Brackenkit's mouth. "Swallow it," he ordered. To Sandstar he added, "It's yarrow. It'll make her sick."

The kit's throat convulsed. A moment later she vomited. Sandstar could see more scarlet specks among the pulp of leaves.

"Good," Cinderpelt mewed soothingly. "That's very good. You're going to be fine, Brackenkit."

The little kit lay gasping and trembling; then Sandstar watched in dismay as she went limp and her eyes closed.

"Is she dead?" he whispered.

Before Cinderpelt could reply, a yowl came from the entrance to the camp. "My kit! Where's my kit?" It was Willowpelt, racing up the ravine with Squirrelpaw. He crouched beside Brackenkit, his blue eyes wide and distraught. "What happened?"

"She ate deathberries," Cinderpelt explained. "But I think I've gotten rid of them all. We'll carry her back to my den and I'll keep an eye on her."

Willowpelt began licking Brackenkit's golden brown tabby fur. By now Sandstar had seen the faint rise and fall of the kit's flank as she breathed. She was not dead, but he could see from Cinderpelt's anxious look that she was still in danger from the effects of the poison.

For the first time Sandstar had a chance to draw breath and look for Silverstream. The silver tabby warrior had pinned Darkstripe down a few tail-lengths away with one paw on her neck and another on her belly. Darkstripe was bleeding from one ear, and she spat in fury as she fought vainly to free herself.

"What's going on?" Sandstar demanded.

"Don't ask me," snarled Silverstream. Sandstar could hardly remember seeing his friend look so savage. "Ask this... this piece of fox dung why she tried to murder a kit!"

"Murder?" Sandstar echoed. The accusation was so unexpected that for a heartbeat he could nothing but stare stupidly.

"Murder," repeated Silverstream. "Go on, ask her why she was feeding deathberries to Brackenkit."

"You mouse-brained fool." Darkstripe's voice was cold as she gazed up at her attacker. "I wasn't feeding her the berries. I was trying to stop her from eating them."

"I know what I saw," Silverstream insisted through gritted teeth.

Sandstar tried to recall the image of the warrior and the kit that he had seen when he paused at the top of the ravine. "Let her get up," he meowed reluctantly to his friend. "Darkstripe, tell me what happened."

The warrior rose and shook herself. Sandstar could see bare patches on her flank where Silverstream had clawed out lumps of fur.

"I was coming back to camp," she began. "I found the stupid kit stuffing herself with deathberries, and I was trying to stop her when this idiot jumped on me." She stared resentfully at Silverstream. "Why would I want to murder a kit?"

"That's what I want to know!" spat Silverstream.

"Of course, we know who the noble Sandstar will believe!" Darkstripe sneered. "There's no use expecting justice in Thunderclan these days."

The accusation stung Sandstar, all the more so because he recognized that there was a core of truth in it. He would take Silverstream's words over Darkstripe's any day, but he had to be absolutely certain that his friend wasn't making a mistake.

"I don't have to decide now," Sandstar meowed. "As soon as Brackenkit wakes up, she'll be able to tell us what happened."

As he spoke he thought he saw a flicker of unease in Darkstripe's eyes, but it was gone so quickly he could not be sure. The dark warrior twitched her ears contemptuously. "Fine," she mewed. "Then you'll see which of us is telling the truth." She stalked off toward the camp entrance with tail held high.

"I did see it, Sandstar," Silverstream assured him, his sides heaving from the fight. "I can't understand why she'd want to hurt Brackenkit, but I'm quite sure that's what she was doing."

Sandstar sighed. "I believe you, but we have to let every cat see that justice is done. I can't punish Darkstripe until Brackenkit tells us what happened."

If she ever does, he added silently to himself. He watched Cinderpelt and Willowpelt gently picking up the kit and carrying her toward the gorse tunnel. Brackenkit's head lolled limply and her tail brushed the ground. Sandstar's belly clenched as he remembered the kit bouncing around the camp. If Darkstripe had really tried to kill her, he would pay.

"Silverstream," he murmured, "go with Cinderpelt. I want you or another warrior on guard in his den until Brackenkit wakes up. Ask Fireheart and Tigerclaw if they'll help. I don't want anything else to happen to Brackenkit before she's fit to talk."

Silverstream's eyes gleamed with understanding. "Okay, Sandstar," he meowed. "I'm on my way." He bounded down the slope and caught up with the other cats as they disappeared into the tunnel.

Sandstar was left in the ravine with Squirrelpaw. "I've left a squirrel up there," he meowed to his apprentice, jerking his head toward the top of the ravine. "Could you collect it for me, please? And then you can rest and eat. You've had a long day."

"Thanks," Squirrelpaw mewed. He took a few steps up the ravine and glanced back. "Brackenkit will be okay, won't she?"

Sandstar let out a long breath. "I don't know, Squirrelpaw," he admitted. "I just don't know."

Chapter 9

Sandstar made his way thoughtfully back into the camp. Glancing around, he caught sight of Darkstripe gulping down a piece of fresh-kill beside the nettle patch. Mousefur, Tigerclaw, and Lionheart were eating close by, but Sandstar noticed that they had all turned their backs on Darkstripe and were not looking at her.

Silverstream must have already begun to spread the news of what had happened in the ravine. Lionheart and Tigerclaw in particular, who had both raised kits of their own, would be horrified by the very suspicion that a Clan warrior would murder a kit. It was a good sign, Sandstar realized, if they seemed to believe Silverstream's version of events. It showed that his friend was becoming accepted by the Clan again, beginning to recover the popularity he had once had.

Sandstar was heading toward Silverstream when movement by the warriors' den caught his eyes. Sorreltail was just emerging from between the branches, gazing wildly around. He spotted Darkstripe, took a step toward her, and then veered away to join Sandstar.

"I've just heard!" he gasped. "Sandstar, I'm sorry. She got away from me. This is all my fault!"

"Steady." Sandstar let his tail rest a moment on the agitated young warrior's shoulder, gesturing for calm. "Tell me what happened."

Sorreltail took a couple of gulping breaths, struggling for self-control. "Darkstripe said she was going out to hunt," he began. "I went with her, but when we got into the forest she said she had to make dirt. She went behind a bush and I waited for her. She was taking a long time, so I went to look—and she'd gone!" His eyes stretched wide with dismay. "If Brackenkit dies, I'll never forgive myself."

"Brackenkit won't die," Sandstar reassured him, though he was not certain that it was the truth. The kit was still very ill.

And now there was something else to worry about. Sorreltail's story showed that Darkstripe had realized she was being watched. She had gotten rid of her guard very neatly. *She must have had a reason,* Sandstar reflected. What had the dark tabby meant to do, and why had she tried to kill Brackenkit?

"What do you want me to do now?" Sorreltail asked miserably.

"Stop blaming yourself, to begin with," Sandstar replied. "Darkstripe was bound to let us know where her loyalties lie sooner or later."

Except for his anxiety over Brackenkit, Sandstar wasn't sorry that Darkstripe had shown her true self in a way that no cat could ignore. Although he had hoped to keep the dark warrior in the Clan, where he could watch her for signs of treachery, now he knew that Darkstripe would never be loyal, to him or to Thunderclan, and there could be no place for a cat who would poison a defenseless kit. *Let her go to Goldenstar, where she belongs,* Sandstar thought.

"Carry on guarding Darkstripe," he went on to Sorreltail. "You can let her know you're doing it now. Tell her from me she's not to leave camp until Brackenkit can tell her story."

Sorreltail gave a tense nod and hurried across to the nettle patch, where he crouched beside Darkstripe and spoke to her. The warrior snarled something in reply and went back to tearing apart her piece of fresh-kill.

As Sandstar watched, a pawstep sounded behind him and he turned to see Fireheart; the flame-colored she-cat pressed her muzzle against his, a purr deep in her throat. Sandstar drew in her scent, comforted for a moment just by being close to her.

"Are you coming to eat?" she asked. "I waited for you. Silverstream told me what happened," she continued as they padded together over to the nettle patch. "I said I'd relieve him later, to guard Cinderpelt's den."

"Thanks," Sandstar mewed.

He shot a glance at the black-striped warrior as they walked past her to the pile of fresh-kill. Darkstripe had finished her meal; she rose to her paws and stalked toward the warriors' den without acknowledging Sandstar's presence. Sorreltail followed with a determined look on his face.

Ferncloud emerged from the den just as Darkstripe reached it; Sandstar couldn't help noticing that the pale gray flecked cat veered sharply away as he went to join Dustpaw outside the apprentices' den. The cats of Thunderclan were making their feelings very clear. Ferncloud had been Darkstripe's apprentice, and now he didn't even want to speak to his former mentor.

Sandstar picked out a magpie from the fresh-kill pile and took it over to the nettle patch.

"Hey, Sandstar," meowed Mousefur as he approached. "Blossompaw said you were going to have a word with me about his warrior ceremony. It's about time."

"It certainly is," Sandstar agreed. Oakstar's refusal to make the three oldest apprentices into warriors had led to Swiftpaw's death and Lostface's injuries, and there wouldn't be a cat in the Clan who didn't remember that when Blossompaw finally received his warrior name. "Why don't the three of us take the dawn patrol tomorrow? That should give me a chance to see how he's shaping up—not that I have any doubts," he added hastily.

"I should think not!" Mousefur mewed. "Will you tell Blossompaw about the patrol or shall I?"

"I will," Sandstar replied, taking a quick bite of his magpie. "I want a word with Dustpaw and Ashpaw, too."

When he and Fireheart had finished eating, the flame-colored she-cat went off to Cinderpelt's den, while Sandstar padded over toward the tree stump where the apprentices ate. Ferncloud and Dustpaw were already there with Blossompaw and Ashpaw, and Cloudtail was just strolling over from the elders' den, Lostface close beside

him.

"Blossompaw." Sandstar gave the apprentice a nod as he settled down beside him. "Are your claws sharp? All your warrior skills ready?"

Blossompaw sat up straight, his eyes suddenly gleaming. "Yes, Sandstar!"

"Dawn patrol tomorrow, then," Sandstar told him. "If it goes well, we'll hold your ceremony at sunhigh."

Blossompaw's ears quivered with anticipation, but then the light in his eyes slowly died and he looked away.

"What's the matter?" Sandstar asked.

"Swiftpaw... and Lostface." Blossompaw spoke in a low voice, with a flick of his tail toward the injured she-cat. "They should both be with me."

"I know." Sandstar closed his eyes briefly at the memory of so much pain. "But you mustn't let that spoil it for you. You've deserved this for moons."

"I *will* be with you, Blossompaw." Lostface spoke up from where she was sitting beside Brightheart. "I'll be the first cat to call you by your new name."

"Thanks, Lostface," Blossompaw mewed with a grateful dip of his head.

"And while we're on the subject of names," Brightheart broke in, "what about *hers*?" He tilted his head toward Lostface; he always refused to use the cruel name Oakstar had bestowed on the injured cat. "What about getting it changed?"

"*Can* you change a warrior's name?" Sandstar asked. "It's given in the sight of Starclan."

Brightheart let out a sigh of exasperation. "I never thought I'd call my Clan leader a mouse-brain, but *honestly*! Do you think Halftail or

One-eye started off with those names? They had other warrior names first, you can be sure of that. There must be a ceremony of some sort. And I know the rest of the Clan won't accept a new name until you've said the right words."

"Please, Sandstar." Lostface was looking at him with a hopeful expression. "I'm sure the other cats wouldn't feel so awkward talking to me if I didn't have this awful name."

"Of course." Sandstar felt a stir of distress that he hadn't noticed the burden the young cat was carrying. "I'll talk to the elders right away. Halftail is bound to know what to do."

He rose to his paws and suddenly remembered what else he had meant to say. "Ashpaw, Dustpaw, don't think that you've been forgotten. You were brilliant in the race with the dog pack, but you're still a bit young to be made warriors." That was true, but at the same time Sandstar wanted Blossompaw to keep his seniority by being made warrior first. "I promise it won't be long," he told them.

"We understand," Ashpaw mewed. "There's still stuff we need to learn."

"Sandstar," Dustpaw asked nervously, "what's going to happen about... about Darkstripe? If she did that to Brackenkit, I don't want her for my mentor."

"If she did that to Brackenkit, she won't *be* your mentor," Sandstar promised.

"Brackenkit?" Brightheart demanded. "What's all this about Brackenkit? Did something happen while we were out hunting?"

Immediately Blossompaw and Ashpaw shifted position to crouch beside him and Lostface, and began passing on the news in hushed voices.

"So who's going to mentor Dustpaw then?" Ferncloud asked Sandstar, taking it for granted that Darkstripe was guilty. "I could manage her as well as Ashpaw," he suggested hopefully.

Dustpaw brightened but Sandstar shook his head. "Not a chance,

Ferncloud. You wouldn't be nearly tough enough with her."

Ferncloud's eyes sparked with annoyance; then he nodded sheepishly. "I suppose you're right."

"Don't worry," Sandstar promised as he headed for the elders' den. "I'll make sure she gets a good mentor."

Inside their den beside the fallen tree trunk, the elders were settling down for the night.

"What's the matter *now*?" Speckletail grumbled, raising his head from his mossy nest. "Can't a cat get a wink of sleep around here?"

Runningwind let out a drowsy purr. "Don't listen to him, Sandstar. You're always welcome."

"Thanks, Runningwind," Sandstar meowed. "But it's Halftail I want to talk to."

Halftail was curled up in a clump of ferns in the shelter of the trunk. She blinked her eyes and opened her jaws in a huge yawn. "I'm listening, Sandstar. But make it quick."

"I need to ask you about names," Sandstar began, and he explained how Brightheart wanted a new name for Lostface.

At the sound of the young cat's name, Smallear padded over and sat listening. She had cared for Lostface when she was newly injured, and a strong bond had developed between them.

"I can't say I blame Brightheart," she commented when Sandstar had finished. "No cat wants a name like that."

Halftail yawned. "I was already old when they changed my name to Halftail," she mewed, "and to be honest I don't care what they call me so long as they bring the fresh-kill on time. But it's different for a young cat."

"So can you tell me what to do?" Sandstar prompted.

"Of course I can." Halftail raised her stumpy tail and beckoned him

closer. "Come here, and listen carefully..."

Heavy rain fell during the night. When Sandstar led Mousefur and Blossompaw out of the camp at dawn, he saw that the light snowfall had vanished. Every fern and clump of grass was loaded with drops of water that shone as daylight seeped into the sky. Shivering, Sandstar set a brisk pace.

He could see from the gleam in Blossompaw's eyes that the young cat was wildly excited, but he kept calm, determined to show his leader that he was fit to be a warrior. The three cats paused at the top of the ravine, where the breeze was carrying a strong scent of mouse. Blossompaw flashed an inquiring look at Sandstar, who nodded.

"We're not hunting," he mewed quietly, "but we won't say no to a bit of prey. Let's see your action."

Blossompaw froze for a moment, pinpointing the mouse scuffling among the leaves under a bush. Stealthily he crept up on it, his body falling smoothly into the hunter's crouch. Sandstar noticed approvingly that he remembered how sensitive the mouse would be to the vibration of his pawsteps; he almost seemed to float over the ground. Then he sprang, and turned back to Sandstar and his mentor with triumph in his eyes and the limp body of the mouse in his jaws.

"Well done!" meowed Mousefur.

"That was great," Sandstar agreed. "Bury it now, and we'll pick it up on the way back."

When Blossompaw had scraped earth over his catch, Sandstar led the patrol toward Snakerocks. He had not been this way since that dreadful morning when he had discovered the trail of dead rabbits laid by Goldenstar to lead the dog pack to the Thunderclan camp. He swallowed bile in his throat as he remembered the reek of blood, but this morning he could detect nothing but the ordinary forest scents. When they reached Snakerocks everything was silent. The howls and barking that he had heard coming from the cave were now no more than a memory.

"Right, Blossompaw," Sandstar meowed, trying not to reveal the clinging horror that he sill felt about this place. "What can you smell?"

The apprentice lifted his head and opened his jaws to draw air past his scent glands. Sandstar could see that he was concentrating fiercely.

"Fox," he announced at last. "It's stale, though... two days old, I'd guess. Squirrel. And... and just a trace of dog." He shot a glance at Sandstar, who could see that the young cat showed his own misgivings. Blossompaw knew as well as any of them that this was where Swiftpaw had died and Lostface had been attacked.

"Anything else?"

"The Thunderpath," Blossompaw replied. "And there's something..." He tasted the air again. "Sandstar, I don't understand. I think I can smell cats, but it's not the scent of any of the Clans. Coming from over there." He flicked his tail. "What do you think?"

Sandstar took a deep breath and realized that Blossompaw was right. The breeze was blowing a faint trace of unfamiliar cat scent toward them.

"Let's take a look," Sandstar murmured. "And be careful. It might only be a lost kittypet, but you can never tell."

As the three cats padded warily through the undergrowth, the scent grew stronger. Sandstar felt more certain now about the scent. "Rogues or loners," he meowed. "Three of them, I'd guess. And the scent is fresh. We must have just missed them."

"But what are they doing on our territory?" Blossompaw asked. "Are they Goldenstar's rogues, do you think?" He was referring to the band of Clanless cats who had helped Goldenstar to attack Thunderclan during his exile, before he had joined Shadowclan.

"No," replied Mousefur. "Goldenstar's rogues took on Shadowclan scent long ago. This must be a new lot."

"As for what they're doing," Sandstar added, "I'd like to know that,

too. Let's follow them. Blossompaw, you lead."

Blossompaw was serious now, his excitement at his upcoming warrior ceremony lost in the possible threat from the group of rogues. He did his best to follow the scent but lost it in a marshy stretch of ground, where not even Sandstar could pick it up again.

"I'm sorry, Sandstar," mewed Blossompaw, crestfallen.

"It's not your fault," Sandstar reassured him. "If the scent's gone, it's gone." He raised his head, staring in the direction the trail had led them. It looked as if the strange cats were heading for the Thunderpath, or perhaps for Twolegplace. In either case, they were on their way out of the territory. He shrugged. "I'll tell the patrols to keep a lookout, but hopefully there's nothing to worry about. That was well scented, Blossompaw." Turning to the young cat, he added with a purr of approval. "Let's head back to camp. We have a warrior ceremony to arrange."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"

Almost at once Sandstar saw Blossompaw approaching from the apprentices' den with Mousefur beside him. Both cats had groomed themselves for the ceremony; Blossompaw's tortoiseshell and white fur shone in the gray light of leaf-bare, and he looked as if he would burst with pride.

As he waited for the rest of the Clan to emerge, Sandstar spotted Cinderpelt coming from his den. Silverstream was with him, and the two cats had their heads together, talking in low voices. Sandstar wondered how Brackenkit was getting on. He had briefly looked into the medicine cat's den before he left with the dawn patrol. The kit had been sleeping then, and Cinderpelt had still not been prepared to say weather he thought the poison was out of her system. Sandstar decided to check on Brackenkit again as soon as the ceremony was over.

He could not help noticing Darkstripe emerging from the warriors' den with Sorreltail right behind her. When they sat down in front of the Highrock, a space cleared itself all around them. None of the

other cats wanted to be anywhere near Darkstripe. The warrior stared straight ahead with a sneer on her face, but Sandstar guessed she would be as anxious as the rest of them to know if Brackenkit would recover.

Sandstar looked at the rest of the Clan for a moment. This was a day that Blossompaw would remember for the rest of his life, but it was special for Sandstar too, because Blossompaw was the first warrior he would make as Clan leader.

His voice rang out clearly as he began the ceremony with the words that were familiar to him from his own ceremony and all the others he had seen. "I, Sandstar, leader of Thunderclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn." Turning to the apprentice, Sandstar continued, "Blossompaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Blossompaw's reply was firm and confident. "I do."

"Then by the powers of Starclan," Sandstar declared, "I give you your warrior name; Blossompaw, from this moment you will be known as Blossomfall. Starclan honors your loyalty and your intelligence, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Thunderclan."

Stepping forward, Sandstar rested his muzzle on the top of Blossomfall's head, feeling the new warrior quiver with excitement. Blossomfall licked his shoulder in return, and met his gaze with a long look in which happiness and sorrow were mingled. Sandstar knew he was remembering his denmate Swiftpaw, dead before she could know the fulfilment of being a warrior.

As Blossomfall stepped back to join the warriors, Lostface slipped over to him. "Blossomfall!" she purred, swiping her tongue over his ear. She had kept her promise to be the first cat to greet him with his new warrior name, and her voice held warmth and pride in his achievement.

Brightheart pressed up beside her, greeting Blossomfall in his turn,

and flashed a questioning look at Sandstar.

Sandstar gave him a nod. For a few moments he allowed the Clan to welcome the new warrior by chanting his name, and then signaled with his tail for silence. When the cats had settled down, he meowed, "Before you go, I've something more to say. First, I want to honor the apprentice who should have been here, receiving her warrior name along with Blossomfall. You all know how Swiftpaw met her death trying to hunt down the dog pack who threatened us. Her Clan will always remember that."

There was a murmur of agreement from the assembled cats. Sandstar glanced at Longtail, who had been the dead apprentice's mentor, and saw a look of pride and grief cross her face.

"In addition," Sandstar continued. "I want to give thanks from the Clan to Dustpaw and Ashpaw. They showed the bravery of warriors in the race against the dogs, and although they are still too young to receive their warrior names, we honor them."

"Dustpaw! Ashpaw!" The two apprentices looked overwhelmed to hear themselves praised by their Clamates, and Ferncloud's eyes shone with delight. Only Darkstripe, Dustpaw's mentor, remained silent, staring coldly in front of her without even turning to look at her apprentice.

Sandstar waited until the noise died down. "There's one more ceremony to perform." He flicked his tail to beckon Lostface out of the crowd. Nervously she stepped forward to stand in front of him; Brightheart followed her, remaining a tail-length or so away.

A murmur of surprise went through the watching cats. Many of them, Sandstar realized, would not know what was about to happen. The name-changing ceremony for a warrior who had already been given a new name had not been held for many seasons.

Remembering what Halftail had told him, he began to speak. "Spirits of Starclan, you know every cat by name. I ask you now to take away the name from the cat you see before you, for it no longer stands for what she is."

He paused and saw the young white she-cat shiver, as she waited, nameless, before Starclan. Sandstar hoped she would like the name he had chosen for her, he had thought hard before he was sure he had gotten it right.

"By my authority as Clan leader," Sandstar announced, "and with the approval of our warrior ancestors, I give this cat a new name. From this moment she will be known as Cloudtail, for though her body has been gravely injured and her tail and soft like clouds, we honor her brave spirit and the light that shines on within her."

He stepped closer to the newly named Cloudtail, and as he had done in the warrior ceremony, rested his muzzle on her head. She responded like any newly named warrior by licking his shoulder.

"Cloudtail! Cloudtail!" The yowl rose from the assembled cats. Cloudtail had been popular when she was an apprentice, and the whole Clan had grieved over her injuries. She would never be a warrior in the truest sense of the word, but there would always be a place for her in Thunderclan.

Sandstar led Cloudtail to where Brightheart was waiting. "Well?" he asked. "Is that fair enough for you?"

Brightheart could barely reply; he was too busy pressing his muzzle against Cloudtail's and winding his tail with hers. "It's perfect, Sandstar," he murmured.

Cloudtail's good eye brimmed with happiness and she was purring too hard to speak, but she blinked her gratitude at Sandstar. She had carried the burden of Oakstar's anger against Starclan for too long, and even if she could never become a full warrior, she had a name to be proud of now.

Sandstar swallowed, his throat choked with emotion. It was moments like this that made being a leader worthwhile.

"Listen, Sandstar," meowed Brightheart after a moment, "Cloudtail and I are going to train together. We're going to work on a fighting technique she can mange with just one eye and ear. When she's able to fight again, can she leave the elders and come to live in the

warriors' den with the rest of us?"

"Well..." Sandstar was uncertain. Cloudtail could never be a full warrior because she couldn't hunt alone, and she would be at a serious disadvantage in a fight. But it was hard to resist her determination; besides, Sandstar wanted her to be able to defend herself and her Clanmates as best she could. "You haven't got an apprentice yet, Brightheart," he agreed, "so you do have the time to spend with Cloudtail."

"Does that mean we can train together?" Brightheart urged.

"Please, Sandstar," meowed Cloudtail. "I want to be of some use to the Clan."

"All right," Sandstar agreed. With a sudden thought he added, "If you work out some new moves, we can trach them to the others. Cloudtail isn't the first warrior to be injured like this, and she won't be the last."

Brightheart meowed agreement. The two young cats were moving away when Brindleface, who had been Cloudtail's mentor, came up to congratulate her. To Sandstar, he added, "I looked in on Brackenkit just before the ceremony. She was starting to wake up. Cinderpelt thinks she'll recover."

"That's great news!" Sandstar purred. Brindleface, he remembered, was Brackenkit's father. "Do you think she's fit yet to tell us what happened?"

"You'll have to ask Cinderpelt," The flecked pale gray tabby warrior replied. "Go now—I'll see to the patrols."

Sandstar thanked him and hurried toward the medicine cat's den.

Cinderpelt met him at the mouth of the fern tunnel. "I was coming to look for you," he meowed. After hearing Brindleface's good news, Sandstar was surprised to see the depth of anxiety in his eyes. "Brackenkit is awake," he went on. "She's going to be fine. But you need to hear the story she has to tell."

Chapter 10

Author's Note: Remember everyone, there will be no chapter tomorrow because it's Christmas and I will be with family! Happy holidays everyone!

Brackenkit was curled up in a mossy nest near the entrance to Cinderpelt's den. She raised her head as Sandstar approached with the medicine cat, but her eyes were heavy and it looked as though she was finding it difficult to move.

Fireheart was crouched close beside her on guard duty. "Poor little scrap," she murmured to Sandstar. "She nearly died. We've got to do something about Darkstripe."

The flame-colored she-cat was looking as anxious as Cinderpelt; she would have heard Brackenkit's story too, Sandstar realized. He nodded. "You can leave Darkstripe to me." Settling down beside Brackenkit, he mewed gently, "I'm glad to see you're awake, Brackenkit. Can you tell me what happened to you?"

The tiny golden brown tabby kit blinked up at him. "Sootkit and Rainkit were asleep in the nursery," she began in a faint voice. "But I wasn't sleepy. My father wasn't watching, so I went to play in the ravine. I wanted to catch a mouse. And then I saw Darkstripe." Her voice shook as she hesitated.

"Go on," Sandstar encouraged her.

"She was coming up the ravine by herself. I knew she should have had Sorreltail with her, and I... I wondered where she was going. I followed her—I remembered the time she took Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw out of the camp, and I thought I might have an adventure like that, too."

Sandstar felt a pang of sadness as he remembered how Brackenkit was always so bright and curious, getting into trouble because of her misguided courage. This limp scrap of fur didn't look at all

adventurous now, and Sandstar could only hope that with Cinderpelt's care she would soon be her lively self again.

"I followed her a long way," Brackenkit went on, sounding rather proud of herself. "I'd never been so far from the camp. I hid from Darkstripe too—she didn't know I was there. And then she met another cat—a cat I'd never seen before."

"What other cat? What did it look like? What scent did it have?" Sandstar questioned her urgently.

Brackenkit looked bewildered. "I didn't recognize the scent," she mewed. Her nose wrinkled. "But it was yucky. She was a big white cat—bigger than you, Sandstar. And she had black paws."

Sandstar stared at her as he realized whom she had seen. "Blackfoot!" he exclaimed. "Goldenstar's deputy. That was Shadowclan scent you smelled, Brackenkit."

"And what's Darkstripe doing, meeting the Shadowclan deputy on *our* territory?" Fireheart growled. "That's what I'd like to know."

"So what happened then?" Sandstar prompted the kit.

"I got scared," Brackenkit admitted, looking down at her paws. "I ran back to camp, but I think Darkstripe must have heard me, because she caught up with me in the ravine. I thought she would be angry because I spied on her, but she told me how clever I was. She gave me some red berries for a special treat. They looked tasty, but when I ate them I started to feel really ill... And I don't remember anything else, except waking up here."

She sank her head on her paws again as she finished, as if telling the long story had exhausted her.

Cinderpelt nosed her gently, checking her breathing. "Those were deathberries," he mewed. "You must never, ever touch them again."

"I won't, Cinderpelt, I promise," murmured the tiny kit.

"Thank you, Brackenkit," Sandstar meowed. He was angry but not surprised to discover that Silverstream had been right all along. The

real shock was the news that Blackfoot had been seen on Thunderclan territory, and that Darkstripe had obviously arranged to meet her.

"What are you going to do about Darkstripe?" asked Fireheart.

"I'll have to question her," Sandstar replied. "But I don't expect she'll tell me anything."

"She can't stay in Thunderclan after this," Fireheart pointed out, her voice hard as flint. "There's more than one cat who would rip her throat out for a couple of mousetails."

"Leave her to me," Sandstar mewed grimly.

Cinderpelt stayed with Brackenkit, who was drifting off to sleep again, while Sandstar returned to the main clearing with Fireheart. Many of the cats were still there, sharing tongues after the earlier meeting. Brindleface was heading for the gorse tunnel with Tigerclaw and Longtail.

The patrol turned back and all the cats look up, startled, as Sandstar bounded to the top of the Highrock and yowled the summons to another meeting. His gaze sought out Darkstripe, but there was no sign of her.

"Where's Darkstripe?" he meowed at Silverstream as his friend made his way to the base of the rock.

"In the den," Silverstream replied.

"Fetch her."

Silverstream disappeared into the warriors' den, and emerged a moment later with Darkstripe and Sorreltail by his side. All three cats returned to the base of the Highrock, where Darkstripe sat and looked up at Sandstar with a sneer on her face.

"Well?" she asked. "What does out noble leader want now?"

Sandstar met her eyes steadily. "Brackenkit is awake."

For a few heartbeats Darkstripe held his gaze, and then she looked away. "Have you called a Clan meeting to tell us that?" her tone was scoffing, but her fur had bristled uneasily at the news.

"Cats of Thunderclan." Sandstar raised his voice. "I've called you together so that you can witness what Darkstripe has to say. You all heard what happened to Brackenkit yesterday. She's awake now, and Cinderpelt says she'll be fine. I've talked to her and she confirms what Silverstream said. Darkstripe did feed her the deathberries. So, Darkstripe"—his gaze went back to the dark warrior below—"what have you to say for yourself?"

"She's lying," Darkstripe retorted. An angry hiss came from more than one of the cats around her, and she added, blustering. "Or she made a mistake. Kits never listen to what any cat says. She obviously didn't hear me properly when I told her not to eat them."

"She's not lying or mistaken," Sandstar meowed. "And she told me something even more interesting: your reason for feeding her the deathberries. She saw you meeting Blackfoot, the deputy of Shadowclan, on our territory. Would you like to tell us what that was all about?"

More furious snarls came from the Clan, and a cat at the back of the crowd yowled, "Traitor!" Sandstar had to signal with his tail for silence, and it was several moments before the angry cats quieted down again.

Darkstripe waited until she could make herself heard. "I don't have to justify myself to a kittypet," she growled.

Sandstar's claws scraped against the rock beneath his paws, and he felt reassured by their sharpness. "That's exactly what you have to do. I want to know what you and Goldenstar are planning." Panic suddenly flooded over him, and he forced it back. "Darkstripe, you *know* what Goldenstar tried to do to us. The dog pack would have torn the whole Clan to pieces. How can you even think of following him after that?"

Darkstripe met his eyes resentfully and did not reply. Sandstar remembered how he had caught her on the morning the pack

attacked, trying to slip away from the camp with Goldenstar's kits. Darkstripe had known that Goldenstar was planning something; she would have abandoned the rest of the Clan to a ghastly death without even trying to warn them. That was what her loyalty to Thunderclan was worth.

Sandstar wanted to be fair, so that no cat, not even Darkstripe herself, could accuse him of persecuting Goldenstar's former allies. Even more than that, Sandstar was still afraid of what Darkstripe might do if she left Thunderclan and was free to go to Goldenstar. But he was left with no choice. Exile was the only possible sentence for a cat guilty of Darkstripe's crimes.

"You could have been a valuable warrior," he went on to Darkstripe. "I gave you one chance after another to prove yourself. I wanted to trust you, and—"

"Trust me?" Darkstripe interrupted. "You've never trusted me. Do you think I didn't know you told that tortoiseshell fool to watch me?" She spat the last words toward Sorreltail, still seated beside her. "Did you expect me to live the rest of my days with a shadow?"

"No. I was waiting for you to show your loyalty." Sandstar crouched on the rock and held Darkstripe's furious gaze without flinching. "This is the Clan where you were born; these are the cats you grew up with. Doesn't that mean anything to you? The warrior code says you should protect them with your life!"

As Darkstripe rose to her paws Sandstar thought he could see fear flickering in her eyes, as if the dark warrior had never intended to make a final break with Thunderclan. She could not be sure, after all, that Goldenstar would welcome her; she had refused to follow the former deputy into exile, and she had failed in her attempt to take Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw to their father before the attack from the dogs. Goldenstar was not a cat who forgave easily.

But there was no trace of fear or regret in Darkstripe's voice as she spoke. "This is *not* my Clan," she hissed scornfully, to gasps of shock from the warriors around her. "Not any longer. Thunderclan is led by a kittypet, and there's nothing left to fight for. I feel no loyalty to Thunderclan. In the whole forest, the only cat worth following is

Goldenstar."

"Then follow him," Sandstar retorted. "You are no longer a warrior of Thunderclan. If you are found in our territory after sunset today, we shall treat you as we would any enemy. Go now."

Darkstripe's burning gaze held Sandstar's for a moment longer, but she didn't reply. Unhurriedly, she turned her back on Sandstar and stalked toward the camp entrance. The cats nearby drew back as she passed them.

"You know what will be waiting for you if you try to come back," Brightheart snarled, curling his lip. Willowpelt said nothing, but spat, his fur bristling.

As soon as the tip of Darkstripe's tail had vanished into the tunnel, a murmur of speculation broke out among the crowd of cats. One voice rose up clearly. "Has Darkstripe gone to Shadowclan?" asked Rowanpaw.

She had not joined in the Clan'sprotests when Sandstar had tried to force Darkstripe to admit her guilt. Instead she had watched everything in silence fascination, her eyes following the dark warrior every pawstep of the way to the tunnel. She looked shocked and sickened, but there was something else in her expression that Sandstar could not read.

He froze as she asked her question. This apprentice knew that her father was the leader of Shadowclan. Did she understand the full extent of Darkstripe's treachery?

"I don't know," he admitted. "Darkstripe can go where she likes. From now on she is not a member of Thunderclan."

"Does that mean we can chase her out of the territory if we see her?" Brindleface called.

"Yes, it does," Sandstar replied. Addressing all the cats, he added, "If you scent her, or any Shadowclan cats, tell me or Brindleface. And that reminds me—this morning Blossomfall scented rogue cats on our territory. Keep a lookout for them, too, and report anything you

find."

Giving the orders helped him calm down. He could not help feeling the first creeping sensations of relief that at last he had Darkstripe out of his fur. There would be no more kittypet taunts, no more worries about weather all the Clan's business was being relayed straight to Goldenstar. Even though Sandstar was worried about what Darkstripe would do now, there was more gain than loss in the dark warrior's departure. Yet still Sandstar could not help wishing that he could have earned her loyalty.

"Hey, Sandstar!" Ferncloud's voice startled him out of his thoughts. "What about Dustpaw? She hasn't got a mentor now."

"Thanks, Ferncloud, I'll deal with that right away. Dustpaw, come up to the rock."

Dustpaw obeyed, leaving Ferncloud's side to step delicately around the cats in her way until she stood at the foot of the Highrock.

Sandstar glanced around to make sure the warrior he wanted was present, and hastily summoned the right words. "Longtail, you are without an apprentice since Swiftpaw died. You were an excellent mentor to her, and I expect you to pass on your skills to Dustpaw for the rest of her apprenticeship."

Longtail sprang to her paws, her eyes wide with surprise and gratitude. Sandstar beckoned her with his tail, hoping that with Darkstripe gone the last of the hostility between himself and Longtail could be buried. The pale tabby warrior could easily be a fine member of the Clan.

Still looking stunned, Longtail padded up to Dustpaw and touched noses with her. Dustpaw dipped her head and both cats withdrew to where Ferncloud and Ashpaw were sitting.

Sandstar leaped down from the Highrock. Now that everything was over exhaustion hit him like a blow from a badger's paw. What he wanted more than anything was to curl up with his friends in the warriors' den, to share tongues and sleep. But as leader of the Clan, he couldn't do that.

Darkstripe's treachery and the knowledge that Shadowclan cats were on his territory had revived all the memories of his nine-lives ceremony. Why had the hill of bones appeared in his dream, and the river of blood that had flowed from it? What did Oakstar's prophecy mean?

Desperate for answers, Sandstar decided he would go to Cinderpelt's den to see if the medicine cat had received any guidance from Starclan.

To his relief, Fireheart was no longer on guard; he did not want the flame-colored she-cat to see him like this. Brackenkit was asleep in her nest, and from the mouth of the split rock came faint sounds of Cinderpelt moving around inside. Sandstar went closer and saw him rearranging the piles of healing herbs and berries that he kept there.

"Nearly out of juniper..." he muttered, then saw Sandstar. "What's the matter? What's happened now?"

He limped out of the den and came up to him, nosing him anxiously as he smelled his fear-scent. "Sandstar, what's wrong?"

Sandstar shook his head to clear it of apprehension. It was a relief to go right back to the beginning, and tell Cinderpelt about the dream that had come to him as he lay beside the Moonstone.

Cinderpelt sat beside him and listened in silence, his steady gaze never leaving his face.

"Oakstar told me, 'Four will become two. Lion and tiger will meet in battle, and blood will rule the forest,'" Sandstar finished. "And then blood oozed out of the hill of bones and started to fill the hollow. Blood everywhere... Cinderpelt what does it all mean?"

"I don't know," Cinderpelt confessed. "Starclan has not shown me any of this. Just as they have the power to show me what will happen, so they can choose not to share with me. I'm sorry, Sandstar—but I'll keep thinking about it, and maybe something will happen to make it clearer soon."

He pushed his nose against Sandstar's fur to comfort him, but

though Sandstar was grateful for his sympathy, he could not forget the horror of his dream. What dreadful fate lay in store for him? And if even Cinderpelt could not answer that question, what hope was there for Thunderclan?

Chapter 11

Author's Note: Hello everyone! I hope you all enjoyed your holidays with family and friends! I have a special surprise for you all... I started an Instagram account dedicated to this series! On there I will be posting completed books, updates/ news, and if anyone is interested, fan art! The account username is warriors.au.wattpad with a profile picture of Pinestar from the updated Ultimate Guide! Give it a follow if you wish!

Sandstar emerged from the forest near Sunningrocks and paused to taste the air. The sun was rising behind him, sending long shadows from the forest toward the river. Several days had passed since Darkstripe had left Thunderclan, and so far the patrols had not brought any news of her, nor of Shadowclan cats in the territory. But the memory of Sandstar's dream was still too sharp for him to believe that the threat from the territory beyond the Thunderpath was over.

Silverstream and Blossomfall padded out of the trees behind him. "Smell anything?" Silverstream asked.

Sandstar shrugged. "Only Riverclan cats. No more than I'd expect, this close to the border. But I want to make sure that they haven't been near Sunningrocks."

"We'll renew the scent markings," meowed Silverstream. "Come on, Blossomfall."

While his friends disappeared into the gullies among the rocks, Sandstar remained where he was, carefully drawing the air over his scent glands. Though he was worried about Shadowclan, he had not forgotten Riverclan or their ambitious leader, Leopardstar. He had tried to retake Sunningrocks not long before, and Sandstar would not be surprised if he decided to try again.

Not many moments passed before he detected fresh Riverclan scent.

Instantly suspicious, he padded around the base of the rocks, only to relax a few moments later as he caught sight of Blackclaw. She was alone, crouched at the very edge of the river, and as Sandstar watched she scooped a fish out of the water and killed it with one blow of her paw.

"Well done!" Sandstar called.

Blackclaw turned, saw him, and padded up the gently sloping bank as far as the border. Sandstar went to meet her there, glad to see that she still looked friendly in spite of the way she had left the Thunderclan camp. But he noticed with alarm that Blackclaw was much thinner than when he had last seen her, and he wondered if something bad had happened following the revelation that Oakstar had been her mother.

"How are you, Blackclaw?" he meowed. "I hope there hasn't been any trouble."

"About me and Stonefur?" Blackclaw replied, guessing his thoughts. She hesitated. "Stonefur told the Clan the truth about Oakstar," she meowed at last. "Some of them didn't like it. One or two of them won't talk to us at all now, and most of them are a bit uneasy with us."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Sandstar mewed. "What about Leopardstar? Has he said anything?"

"I could tell he wasn't pleased. He supported us in front of the Clan, but I think he has an eye on us all the same, to make sure we're still loyal."

"Of course you're loyal!" Sandstar exclaimed.

"Yes, and the rest of the Clan will realize it sooner or later. Besides..." Blackclaw paused again, and then went on. "That isn't the worst of our problems."

"What do you mean?"

"Goldenstar." Blackclaw shivered. "He visits Leopardstar regularly, and i can't work out why. I'm sure they're planning something."

A jolt of fear shot through Sandstar. "Planning what?"

Blackclaw twitched her ears. "I've no idea. Leopardstar hasn't told Stonefur, even though she's his deputy. But there are a couple of Shadowclan warriors stationed permanently in our camp."

"*What*? That shouldn't happen! It must be against the warrior code!"

Blackclaw shrugged, looking defeated. "Try telling that to Leopardstar."

"But what are they doing there?"

"Leopardstar *says* that they're staying with us so the Clans can exchange training methods and fighting techniques, but I don't see much sign of it. All they do is watch... It's like they're learning all about us, all our secrets and weaknesses." Blackclaw's fur bristled as if she saw her enemies in front of her. "That's why I came over here, to get away from them for a bit."

"That's terrible," Sandstar meowed. "What is Leopardstar thinking?"

"You want my opinion? He wants to do the best for his Clan and he thinks Goldenstar is the strongest leader in the forest, so he's set out to be his ally."

"I'm not sure Goldenstar has allies," Sandstar warned her. "Only followers."

Blackclaw nodded. "I know." She sat down, licked one paw, and drew it two or three times over her ear.

Sandstar wondered if she was regretting saying so much to a warrior of another Clan. "How is the prey running?" he asked, hoping to distract her. "At least the river hasn't frozen yet."

"Not yet. Prey's scarce, but that's nothing new." Blackclaw flicked her ears dismissively. "It's leaf-bare, after all. And those two warriors of Goldenstar's don't help," she added. "They sit there in camp stuffing their faces, but they never bring back much fresh-kill."

She broke off at the sound of Silverstream's voice yowling her name. Sandstar turned to see his friend bounding down the bank toward them with Blossomfall just behind him.

"Hi, Blackclaw," panted Silverstream as he came up. "How are Featherpaw and Brookpaw?"

"They're fine, Silverstream," replied Blackclaw, with a purr of welcome for her former Clanmate. Though Silverstream's stay in Riverclan had been short, the two cats had become good friends, and Blackclaw was always willing to give Silverstream news of his kits. "Featherpaw is turning into a great fighter. Thunderclan will have to watch out when he's made a warrior."

Silverstream let out a purr. "Well, he couldn't have a better mentor."

Sandstar backed away while Silverstream and Blackclaw discussed the two apprentices. Blossomfall padded up to him and meowed, "We've renewed the scent markings, Sandstar. There's no fresh Riverclan scent around the rocks."

"That's good," Sandstar responded, though his thoughts were only half on what the young warrior was telling him. Blackclaw's news deeply disturbed him. It sounded as if Riverclan and Shadowclan were allied more closely than ever before. And if Goldenstar decided to go to war, Thunderclan would be trapped between them.

Oh, Starclan, Sandstar murmured to himself. *Show me what I should do now.*

After his talk with Blackclaw, Sandstar ordered extra patrols, but no cat reported anything unusual. The days slipped past peacefully until the time of the next Gathering approached.

As the sun went down behind the thorn hedge, Sandstar sat with Brindleface beside the nettle patch, sharing fresh-kill before the journey.

"Who will you take to the Gathering?" the pale gray tabby warrior asked.

Sandstar swallowed a mouthful of squirrel. "Not you, I think," he replied. "I'm certain Goldenstar is going to make a move of some sort, and I want you to guard the camp. I'll leave you some strong warriors, too."

"I think you're right." Brindleface swiped his tongue around his mouth as he finished his vole. "Goldenstar may have failed with the dog pack but he's bound to try something else."

"I'll take Dustpaw and Ashpaw," Sandstar decided. "And Blossomfall. He'll be looking forward to his first Gathering as a warrior. And Fireheart, Silverstream, and Lionheart. That should leave you with enough fighting strength if Goldenstar sends warriors to attack."

"You think he'll break the truce?" inquired Brindleface.

Sandstar flicked his ears. "What do you think? He led the dog pack to us—do you think he'd bother about a little thing like ignoring the will of Starclan?"

"Starclan?" Brindleface snorted. "Goldenstar behaves as if he's never heard of Starclan." He paused, and then asked, "What about the two young apprentices—Goldenstar's kits? Do you want to take them with you?"

Sandstar shook his head. "Not in a hundred moons. You know what's going to happen, don't you? Goldenstar wants those kits. At the last Gathering, he gave Oakstar one moon to decide whether to hand them over. That time's up now. If Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw are there, I wouldn't put it past Goldenstar to try taking them from the Gathering."

"Nor would I." Brindleface rumbled in agreement. "You think we should keep them, then?"

Sandstar was startled. "Don't you?" He had assumed that Thunderclan would insist on their right to keep the two apprentices, but if his deputy thought that they should give the young cats to their father, Sandstar would consider his opinion carefully.

But Brindleface was nodding. "There's no question that they're

Thunderclan kits. Their mother is Thunderclan and so was their father at the time they were born. Goldenstar going to Shadowclan doesn't alert that. But if we want to keep them, we'll have to fight for them."

"Then we fight," Sandstar meowed determinedly. "Besides," he added, "if we meekly hand them over, Goldenstar will see that as a sign of weakness. He'd be making more demands before you could say 'mouse.'"

"True."

Sandstar took another bite of squirrel, his eyes narrowing as his thoughts moved to the approaching Gathering. "You know, Brindleface," he began, "Goldenstar won't have it all his own way. I've got news for the Gathering, too. How do you think the other Clans will react when I tell them how Goldenstar tried to use the dog pack to destroy us? Not even Brokentail was as ruthless as that. Even Goldenstar's *own* Clan will turn against him. They might even drive him from the forest, and then we'll be rid of him."

Brindleface's ears twitched; to Sandstar's surprise the pale gray tabby warrior didn't look as optimistic as he had expected. "Maybe," he meowed, "but don't be surprised if it doesn't work out like that."

Sandstar stared at him. "You think the warrior code allows a cat to have another Clan torn apart by dogs?"

"No, of course not. But Goldenstar could always deny it. What proof do we have?"

Sandstar thought seriously about what his deputy was saying. One cat—Longtail—had seen Goldenstar feed a rabbit to the pack. Several of the Clan had detected Goldenstar's scent on the trail of rabbits. And Goldenstar had attacked Sandstar himself close to the gorge, to make sure that the dog pack caught him and pulled him down. Only Oakstar's sudden appearance had saved him.

True, Blackclaw and Stonefur had witnessed Goldenstar's presence by the river that day, but they were already having problems within their own Clan. If they spoke up against Goldenstar their Clanmates

might bot believe them. It would be wrong, Goldenstar realized, to add to their troubles.

And all the rest of his evidence rested on the word of Thunderclan cats alone. Both Windclan and Riverclan knew there had been a serious rift between Goldenstar and his birth Clan that had driven the former deputy to leave. Goldenstar could try to make it seem as if the Thunderclan cats were lying.

"Then we'll see who they believe," Sandstar insisted angrily. "Not every cat thinks that Goldenstar is Starclan's gift to the forest. He won't have it all his own way."

"Let's hope not." Brindleface got to his paws and stretched. "You're going to have a lively time tonight, Sandstar. I'll go and tell the warriors you've chosen to be ready."

As he padded away, Sandstar crouched down beside the nettles and finished his squirrel. There was going to be trouble at this Gathering. Goldestar was certain to claim his kits again, and Sandstar suspected that he would take the opportunity to reveal Oakstar's secret as well and denounce Blackclaw and Stonefur as half-Clan cats.

But I've got plenty to say, too, he thought, pushing aside the doubts Brindleface had raised. *When I've finished, no cat in the forest—not even his own Clan—will trust Goldenstar again.*

Chapter 12

Sandstar paused at the top of the hollow before leading his cats down to the Gathering. The night was still. Clouds were building up on the horizon, so that Sandstar had begun to wonder if Starclan was going to hide the moon to show that it was not their will for the Gathering to take place.

But for now the moon rose high above the clouds, and the scent of cats drifted up to Sandstar from the hollow below.

"Only Windclan so far," murmured Silverstream, who was crouched at Sandstar's shoulder. "What's keeping the others?"

Sandstar shrugged. "Starclan knows. Personally, I wouldn't care if Goldenstar never showed up."

He signaled with his tail and led his warriors as they raced down through the bushes and into the clearing at the center of the hollow. As Silverstream had said, only Windclan cats were there. Sandstar spotted their leader, Tallstar, seated with her deputy, Ashfoot, near the base of the Great Rock.

"Greetings, Sandstar," Tallstar mewed, dipping her head courteously as Sandstar approached. "Tornear told me she met you on your way to Highstones. We grieve for Oakstar."

"So does her own Clan," Sandstar responded, bowing his head in turn. "She was a noble leader."

"But you will be a worthy successor," meowed the black and white she-cat, surprising Sandstar by the warmth of her tone. "You've served your Clan well."

"I-I hope to serve it even better in future," Sandstar stammered.

Tallstar nodded once more in response, and sprang up to the top of the rock. Before following her, Sandstar glanced around at his own

cats. They were already circling among the Windclan warriors and beginning to exchange their news. Sandstar was pleased to see that the two Clans seemed friendly toward each other, in spite of the recent clash over missing prey. Worried as he was about Shadowclan and Riverclan, it was good to think that he might find allies in Windclan.

Waving with his tail toward Smokefur and his apprentice, Gorsepaw, who were settling down to talk with Fireheart, Sandstar jumped up to stand beside Tallstar on the top of the Great Rock.

He had stood here once before, when he took Oakstar's place while she was ill after the fire, but he was still not used to looking down on his cats from such a great height, nor seeing their eyes gleam pale from reflected moonlight as they stared up at him. Sandstar's tension increased as he thought about what was to come, and the confrontation with Goldenstar that would surely happen before moonset.

"Shadowclan and Riverclan are late," he remarked.

Tallstar twitched her ears in agreement. "Clouds threaten the moon," she pointed out. A trace of anxiety crossed her face. "Perhaps Starclan is angry."

Looking up, Sandstar saw that the clouds he had noticed earlier were spreading farther across the sky.

The air tasted damp, and his fur prickled with expectation. What would it mean, Sandstar wondered, if Starclan veiled the moon and Goldenstar was left to plot in secret until the next Gathering?

"Tallstar," he began, deciding that the time had come to confide in the Windclan leader and ask for her advice. "I'm worried about what Goldenstar might be planning—"

He never finished. A triumphant yowling from the tip of the hollow interrupted him, and a heartbeat later more cats raced into the clearing as Shadowclan and Riverclan arrived together, their cats fanning out below him. Goldenstar reached the top of the Great Rock in a single bound, and Leopardstar scrambled up beside him.

"Cats of all Clans!" Goldenstar declared, not waiting to greet Tallstar and Sandstar or discuss which of the leaders should speak first. "I have news for you. Listen well, for great change is coming to the forest."

Sandstar stared at the Shadowclan leader in confusion. When Goldenstar first mentioned news, he had thought for a moment he was referring to Blackclaw and Stonefur's half-Clan heritage. Yet that would not merit such a spectacular arrival or make Goldenstar talk about great change.

Below them in the clearing there was dead silence. All the cats stared up at the Great Rock, their eyes wide as they waited for Goldenstar to explain. Every hair on Sandstar's pelt began to bristle and he did not know whether it was due to the tension of the assembled warriors or the threatening rain clouds.

"Great change," Goldenstar repeated. "And Starclan has shown me that it is Shadowclan's task to prepare every cat in the forest to meet it."

"Every cat?" Sandstar heard the quiet murmur from Tallstar. The Windclan leader took a step forward. "Goldenstar—"

"Shadowclan has the favor of Starclan," Goldenstar swept on, ignoring the interruption. "We are blessed because we survived the sickness, and I have received the blessing of our warrior ancestors most of all because it was my task to restore the Clan and make it great again."

Oh, yes? Sandstar thought. He refused to believe that Starclan was showing favor to Goldenstar after all that he had done to his birth Clan. Glancing down into the clearing, he looked for Runningnose. The Shadowclan medicine cat had done her nest to support her Clan during Nightstar's ill-fated leadership, and Sandstar had an idea that she was not entirely happy with Goldenstar as the old she-cat's replacement. He wondered what Runningnose thought of the announcement Goldenstar had just made, but though his gaze searched the clearing carefully he could see no sign of the medicine cat.

Left at home, Sandstar asked himself, *so she can't deny what Goldenstar claims?*

At the same time, he couldn't help noticing that Stonefur was also missing, and he wondered if the Riverclan deputy was in more trouble because of her half-Clan parentage, and what she thought about her leader's decision to ally his Clan with Goldenstar.

One cat Sandstar did spot in the clearing below was Darkstripe. The former Thunderclan warrior was sitting beside Blackfoot, the Shadowclan deputy, and her eyes shone with admiration as she looked up at Goldenstar. It was clear that she had gone straight to her old ally after being driven out of Thunderclan.

"All of you know," Goldenstar went on, "that changes have already come to us—unwelcome changes beyond our control. Last leaf-bare much of the forest was covered by floods. A fire swept through Thunderclan territory." As he mentioned the fire he flashed a look at Sandstar, who would have liked to claw the arrogance off his enemy's battle-scarred face. "Twolegs are moving into our territory in ever greater numbers. Life is growing harder, and as the forest changes around us, we must change to meet the crisis."

Yowls of support rose from below, though Sandstar noticed that they came only from Shadowclan and Riverclan cats. The warriors of Thunderclan and Windclan were exchanging stunned glances, as if they couldn't work out what Goldenstar was trying to say. Sandstar felt just as shocked. He had been so certain that Goldenstar would reveal Blackclaw and Stonefur's secret at this Gathering, and demand his own kits, Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw, from Thunderclan. Sandstar had braced himself, but now he was left to face a completely different challenge.

"Starclan has shown me the way," Goldenstar meowed with a glance at the sky, where the storm clouds were massing more thickly still. "To survive the hardship ahead of us, we must join together. As four Clans, we waste our energies in striving against each other. As one, we would be strong. We must unite!"

Total silence met his words. Sandstar could hear a faint breeze stirring the leafless branches of the four oak trees, and in the

distance a mutter of thunder. He gaped at Goldenstar. A single Clan in the forest? When Starclan had always decreed that there should be four?

"Leopardstar has already agreed to join Riverclan with Shadowclan," Goldenstar told them. "We shall be joint leaders of a greater Clan, to be known as Tigerclan."

Joint leaders? Sandstar didn't believe that for a moment. Goldenstar would never share his leadership with any cat.

Now Goldenstar turned to Sandstar and Tallstar. "We have come to invite you to join the new Clan," he meowed, his yellow eyes glittering. "Let us rule the forest together in friendship and peace."

Before he had finished speaking, Tallstar stepped forward, her fur bristling aggressively. But it was not to Goldenstar that she spoke, instead she addressed all the cats in the clearing below.

"Tigerclan was the name of one of the great Clans of ancient times." Tallstar's voice rang out as strong and clear as if she were still a young cat. "Goldenstar has no right to use it now. Nor does he have the right to change the number of Clans in the forest. We have lived as four Clans for innumerable seasons, following the warrior code laid down for us by Starclan. TO threw aside or ancient ways would bring disaster." Turning to Goldenstar, she hissed, "I'll die before I join my Clan to yours!"

Goldenstar blinked slowly. Sandstar could see a dangerous gleam in his eyes, but his voice was calm as he replied, "Tallstar, I understand. These are important matters, and an older cat like yourself will need time to see that what I'm suggesting is for the good of all our Clans."

"I'm not so old that I've lost my wits, you piece of fox dung!" Tallstar snarled.

Goldenstar flattened his ears, but he kept his temper. "And what does the new leader of Thunderclan think?" he sneered. All the hatred he had ever felt toward the sandy-colored warrior was contained in those words, and even the air felt scorched.

Sandstar's veins throbbed as though they were filled with ice as he imagined the future. His territory and Tallstar's lay between Goldenstar's and Leopardstar's. With Shadowclan and Riverclan in alliance, the two remaining Clans could be crushed between them.

Glancing down, Sandstar saw unease spread among the Thunderclan and Windclan warriors. Fireheart was on her paws, yowling, "Never, Sandstar, never!" but some of the Windclan cats were talking urgently to each other, as if they were considering Goldenstar's proposition. The pale tabby warrior had been clever, Sandstar realized. Much of what he had said was true—times were growing harder, for all the reasons he had given. Maybe some cats would believe their problems could be solved by joining together as one Clan. But Sandstar was convinced that the cats of the forest could fulfill their destiny only if there were four Clans. And even if he had considered for one moment the idea of joining together as one, he would have rejected it if Goldenstar was to be the new Clan's leader.

"Well, Sandstar," Goldenstar rumbled, with another swift glance at the storm-dark sky. "Have you lost your tongue?"

Sandstar took a couple of paces that brought him to Tallstar's side. "I'll never let you take over my Clan," he spat at Goldenstar.

"Make us," Tallstar invited. "If you can."

"Make you?" Goldenstar's yellow eyes widened; for a heartbeat he looked almost genuinely hurt. "I came here in peace with a plan to help us all. Tallstar, Sandstar, I want you to recognize that this is the right decision and come to me willingly. But don't delay too long," he added, a hint of menace in his voice. "Starclan will not wait forever."

Fury blazed up in Sandstar. How dare Goldenstar claim that his attempt to take over the whole forest was the will of Starclan?

Spinning around, he turned his back on the Shadowclan leader and paced to the front of the rock, where he could look down on all the assembled cats. The time had come for him to speak. When he had finished, Goldenstar would be revealed for what he was—a

murderer who would wade through the blood of countless cats to get what he wanted. Let Leopardstar see the kind of cat he had trusted!

"Cats of Windclan, Riverclan, and Shadowclan!" Sandstar yowled. "I can stay silent no longer. You cannot trust Goldenstar any more than you would trust a cornered badger."

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw a swift movement from Goldenstar, a bunching of muscles under the rippling tabby pelt, but then the Shadowclan leader glanced at the sky again, controlled himself, and went on listening with a look of deliberate indifference.

"I know many of you must have wondered why Goldenstar left Thunderclan," Sandstar went on. "You want to know the truth? This cat is power-hungry and dangerous, and he is willing to murder other cats to get what he wants."

He broke off as lightning stabbed down from the sky, a blazing claw of white fire that raked the forest. Thunder crashed overhead, drowning Sandstar's words; it sounded as if the Great Rock itself were being torn up.

"A sign! A sign!" Goldenstar yowled. He gazed up at the sky, his yellow eyes glowing in the light of the moon that still shone between the gathering clouds. "I thank you, Starclan, for showing us your will. This Gathering is over."

Calling a command to his cats to follow him, he bunched his muscles to leap down from the Great Rock. Before he sprang he turned his head, eyes narrowed with hatred. "Bad luck, kittypet," he spat. "Think about my offer. It's your last chance to save those miserable cats."

Before Sandstar had the chance to respond, the Shadowclan leader launched himself from the Great Rock and disappeared into the bushes that lined the hollow. Shadowclan cats poured after him. Leopardstar jumped down in his turn and gathered the warriors of Riverclan.

Sandstar and Tallstar faced each other, shocked and bewildered, as lightning stabbed down again. A gust of wind buffeted the rock, almost carrying Sandstar off his paws, and rain poured from the sky as the storm broke.

Almost blinded by the lashing rain, Sandstar half jumped, half slithered down the side of the rock and streaked across the open ground to the shelter of the bushes, calling to his warriors as he went. Moments later he found himself crouching beneath a hawthorn bush with Silverstream and Fireheart huddled close to him. Shaking rain from his pelt, he looked around for Tallstar, but the Windclan leader had not followed him.

The rain was striking the ground so hard that the drops scattered into a mist of spray. The four oaks thrashed and groaned in the wind. Grasses and ferns were flattened in the fury of the storm. But the chaos in the clearing was no worse than the chaos in Sandstar's mind.

"I can't believe this!" he meowed, raising his voice above the howling wind. "I didn't think even Goldenstar would dare to claim power over all the forest."

"But what can we do about it?" asked Silverstream. "You didn't get to tell the truth about Goldenstar."

"It's not Sandstar's fault that the storm broke," Fireheart pointed out, her hackles rising.

"Too late to worry about it," Sandstar told them. "That prey's killed and eaten now. We have to decide what we do next."

"What is there to decide?" snarled Fireheart. The light of battle shone in her green eyes. "We fight, of course—until we've driven that piece of crow-food out of the forest for good."

Sandstar nodded. Though he said nothing, he couldn't help thinking of Oakstar's prophecy during his dream at the Moonstone.

Four will become two. Lion and Tiger will meet in battle.

"Tiger" must mean the new Tigerclan, but who or what is "Lion"?

Sandstar pushed the question aside as he remembered Oakstar's ominous parting words.

Blood will rule the forest.

Chapter 13

The squall was soon over. Sandstar led his cats home through a forest where every twig and fern dripped water under a clearing sky. Silverpelt glittered brightly, and Sandstar raised his eyes to utter a silent prayer: *Great Starclan, show me what to do.*

He began to worry about whether Goldenstar had sent warriors to attack the camp while Sandstar and the others were away. It would be one way to weaken Thunderclan so that Sandstar had no choice but to ally his surviving cats with Tigerclan. Relief flooded over him as he emerged from the gorse tunnel to see that everything was peaceful.

Brindleface got up from the sentry duty outside the warriors' den and padded over. "You're back early. I wondered if those storm clouds would cover the moon."

"Yes, but it was worse than that," Sandstar replied.

"Worse?" Brindleface's eyes widened in astonishment as Sandstar told him what had happened at the Gathering just before thunder and lightning prevented his revealing words. More cats joined them, and Sandstar was aware of shocked mews as his Clan learned what Goldenstar was planning.

"When the storm broke," Sandstar finished, "Goldenstar said it was a sign from Starclan that he had their favor. He and Leopardstar left, so the Gathering broke up."

"It might well have been a sign," mewed Brindleface thoughtfully. "But one that shows Starclan is angry with Goldenstar."

"Cinderpelt, what do you think?" Sandstar asked the medicine cat, who had listened to the story with deep foreboding in his blue eyes.

"I don't know," he admitted. "If it was a sign, it would mean Starclan stopped you from telling the truth about Goldenstar, and I find that hard to believe." He shrugged. "There are times when a storm is just a storm."

"It was an unlucky one for Thunderclan, then," muttered Longtail.

"I wish I'd been there," Brightheart growled. "I'd have torn Goldenstar's throat out. No more problem."

"In that case, it's a good thing you weren't there," Sandstar retorted. "Attacking a Clan leader at a Gathering? *That* would have made Starclan angry."

Brightheart narrowed his eyes at Sandstar, the challenge clear in his blue gaze. "Why doesn't Starclan do something to help us, then, if it's so powerful?"

"Maybe they will," Cloudtail suggested gently.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Mousefur. He was shifting from paw to paw as if he wanted to race out of camp and confront his enemies right away. "You're not thinking of joining this... Tigerclan, are you?"

"Never," Sandstar assured him. "But we need time to think, and rest." He yawned and stretched. "For now, we'll need extra patrols. Any volunteers to go out at dawn?"

"I will," Mousefur offered instantly.

"Thanks," meowed Sandstar. "Keep a lookout along the border with Shadowclan. And if you come across any of Goldenstar's warriors, you know what to do."

"Oh, *yes*." Brightheart lashed his tail eagerly. "I'll come with you, Mousefur. I could do with some Shadowclan fur to line my nest."

Sandstar didn't try to check the young warrior's hostility. No cat could doubt Brightheart's loyalty to Thunderclan, however scornful he was about Starclan and the warrior code.

Brindleface named Sorreltail and Blossomfall to join the patrol as well, and all four cats padded off to get some rest before dawn. One by one, the other Clan cats headed for their dens. Sandstar was aware of their shock, and the fear they did not quite succeed in hiding.

Eventually he was left alone with only Cinderpelt by his side. He let out a long sigh. "Will there ever be any end to this?" he murmured.

Cinderpelt pressed his muzzle comfortingly against his. "I don't know. It's in the paws of Starclan." He narrowed his eyes. "But sometimes I don't believe there'll be any peace in the forest until Goldenstar is dead."

"Right," Sandstar meowed. "Attack me."

A few foxlengths away, Squirrelpaw crouched on the floor of the hollow. Sandstar waited as the apprentice began to creep toward him, his green eyes darting from side to side as if he was choosing the best place to strike.

A heartbeat later Squirrelpaw launched himself into the air. But Sandstar was ready for him. Slipping rapidly to one side, he butted Squirrelpaw in the flank as he came down, and the young cat lost his balance and rolled over, his paws scuffling up dust.

"You'll have to be quicker than that," Sandstar told him. "Don't give your enemy time to think."

Squirrelpaw scrambled up, spitting out sand, and immediately sprang again. His outstretched paws caught Sandstar on the side of the head, thrusting the older cat sideways so that his paws slid out from under him. Squirrelpaw held him down, his nose almost touching Sandstar's.

"Like that?" he asked.

Sandstar pushed him off. "Let me up, you great lump!" Shaking sand out of his pelt, he added, "Yes, just like that. You're shaping up well, Squirrelpaw."

The apprentice's eyes glowed and Sandstar suddenly felt as if he

were looking at a young Goldenstar—but this was Goldenstar as he should have been: strong, skillful, brave and, yes, ambitious, but in Squirrelpaw all the ambition seemed to be focused on becoming the best warrior that he could be in the service of his Clan.

Sandstar couldn't resist letting out a purr of satisfaction. Amid all the troubles that beset Thunderclan, it was a relief to escape for a short time for a training session with his apprentice.

But Squirrelpaw's next words reminded him of his weightier responsibilities. "Sandstar, I wanted to ask you... why does every cat think it would be so bad to be part of Tigerclan?"

"*What*?" Sandstar felt a surge of anger; he could hardly believe his apprentice had asked the question.

Squirrelpaw flinched, but he went on, steadily meeting his mentor's eyes. "Ashpaw told me what Goldenstar said. It's true that times are hard. Every cat's always complaining about the shortage of prey, and how there are more Twolegs in the forest than ever before. Besides, Tigerclan will be the strongest Clan in the forest if Riverclan joins with Shadowclan. Wouldn't it make sense to join them?"

Sandstar took a deep breath. After all, he had asked questions like these when he first came to the forest, not understanding why there should be rivalry and battle between the Clans. He sat down beside Squirrelpaw. "It's not as simple as that," he meowed. "For one thing, there have always been four Clans in the forest. For another, it would mean the end of Thunderclan."

"Why?"

"Because we cannot believe Goldenstar when he says the four leaders would rule jointly." Sandstar tried to speak gently, remembering he was talking about the young cat's father, but there was no hiding the stark truth. "Goldenstar would take control. We would lost everything that makes us Thunderclan."

For a few heartbeats Squirrelpaw was silent. Then he meowed, "I see. Thank you, Sandstar. That's what I wanted to know."

"Then let's get on." Sandstar sprang to his paws. "There's a move I think you might find useful..."

But as he continued with the training session, he found that his optimism about Squirrelpaw's loyalties had started to fade.

When the training session was over, Sandstar sent Squirrelpaw to hunt for the elders. He was about to return to camp when Brightheart bounded over the top of the training hollow, closely followed by Cloudtail.

"Sandstar! We're going yo practice Cloudtail's fighting moves. Do you want to see how she's coming on?"

"Yes, of course—go ahead." Even though Cloudtail's wounds were healed, Sandstar found it hard to think of her as a fighting cat. He couldn't imagine she would ever be able to go into battle with her Clan. but since her change of name she looked much happier and more confident, and he wanted to encourage her as much as he could.

Brightheart and Cloudtail ran into the middle of the hollow. For a few heartbeats they prowled around each other; then Brightheart darted in and gave Cloudtail a couple of blows with sheathed paws on the blind side of her head. Cloudtail rolled with the impact and Sandstar tensed, imagining the damage an enemy cat might have done with his claws out and all his strength behind the blow.

But instead of rolling away from Brightheart, Cloudtail propelled herself toward him, tangling her paws with his and throwing him off balance. Sandstar pricked his ears with interest as the two cats writhed together on the ground, and suddenly Cloudtail was on top, pinning Brightheart down with one paw on his neck.

"I've never seen that before," Sandstar meowed, padding over to join them as Cloudtail released Brightheart and the young white and ginger warrior jumped up and shook sand out of his pelt. "Cloudtail, try it on me."

Looking nervous, Cloudtail faced him. Sandstar found it harder than he had expected to come up on her blind side; the young she-cat

kept weaving back and forth so that he had to change his position. When at last he leaped at her, she slid under his outstretched paws and tripped him in the same way that she had surprised Brightheart. For a few heartbeats they wrestled together until at last Sandstar managed to hold her down.

"Harder than it looks, isn't it?" meowed Brightheart, strolling up beside them with a delighted expression.

"It certainly is. Well done, Cloudtail." Sandstar let the she-cat get up, her uninjured eye was shining at his praise. For the first time he began to wonder if she had a future as a warrior after all. "Keep practicing," he told her. "And let me watch you again soon. I think you might have something to teach the Clan."

After the storm, the weather turned cold again. Every morning the grass and ferns were furred with frost, and there was another light fall of snow. Prey became scarcer still, and what the hunters managed to catch was thin and scrawny, scarcely a mouthful for a hungry cat.

"If I don't get a decent meal soon I'll fade away to a shadow," Silverstream complained.

He and Sandstar were on patrol not far from Fourtrees, along with Longtail and Blossomfall. Sandstar had hoped they would find more prey farther from the camp, where the fire had never reached, but the catch was pitifully small.

"I'm going to try down by the stream," Sandstar meowed.

He headed down the slop to where a thicker growth of fern and shrubs marked the line of the stream. When he paused to taste the air the prey-scent was faint, and he could not hear any of the small sounds that would have alerted him to creatures scurrying through the grass.

With so little fresh-kill, the Clan was growing weaker by the day. Just enduring leaf-bare would be hard enough, but on top of that there was the new threat from Tigerclan. Would they be strong enough to defend themselves? Sandstar wondered.

His pawsteps led him by instinct down toward the stream and he crouched down to drink, prodding the thin ice at the very edge and shaking icy drops off his paw when it gave way.

As Sandstar bent his head to lap from the stream, the sun came out behind him, striking through the leaves. Light dazzled on the water and surrounded Sandstar's reflection with golden rays. For a moment the image of his head disappeared, to be replaced by that of a roaring lion. It was the beast Sandstar had heard described in so many elders' tales, his sandy-colored pelt blazing into a luxuriant mane, his eyes shining with unlimited strength and power.

Startled, Sandstar leaped backward. He let out a yowl as he collided with a tree and stumbled into the dead leaves among its roots. When he looked up, Spottedleaf was facing him from across the stream.

The handsome tortoiseshell's eyes were brimming with amusement, and he let out a little *mrrow* of laughter.

"Spottedleaf!" Sandstar gasped. He had never come to him before when he was awake, and he wondered what this might mean. He sprang to his paws, ready to splash through the stream to his side, but he signaled with his tail for him to stay where he was.

"Take heed of what you have seen, Sandstar," he told him, his amusement vanishing like the frost at dawn. "Learn what you must be."

"What do you mean?" Sandstar asked urgently.

But as he finished speaking, Spottedleaf began to fade. His eyes rested on him, filled with love, and his body paled until Sandstar could see the bank of the stream through it.

"Spottedleaf, don't leave me yet," he begged. "I need you."

But his eyes shone for a heartbeat longer, and then he was gone.

"Sandstar!" It was Silverstream's voice. Sandstar shook his head to clear it and turned to face his friend as he came padding down the bank.

"Are you okay?" Silverstream asked. "You yowled loud enough to scare all the prey between here and Fourtrees!"

"I'm fine," Sandstar replied. "Something startled me, that's all."

Silverstream examined him for a moment longer, as if he wasn't quite satisfied with his leader's explanation, and then turned away. "If you say so," he meowed, returning up the bank. "Come and see the rabbit Longtail caught—it's as big as a fox!"

Sandstar stayed where he was. He was still trembling from the shock of his vision. He had seen himself like one of the great warriors of old, a member of Lionclan. Oakstar's prophecy echoed in his head again: *Lion and Tiger will meet in battle.*

Did this mean that a new Clan—Lionclan—would arise to combat Tigerclan? And did Starclan intend *Sandstar* to lead it?

Chapter 14

"Sandstar," meowed Silverstream. "I want to ask you something."

Sandstar was crouching by the nettle patch. He had just seen Sorreltail leaving at the head of the evening patrol, and now he was eating his share of fresh-kill before rounding up a patrol of his own for an extra check on the Shadowclan border.

"Sure," he replied. "What is it?"

Silverstream crouched beside him, but before he could speak Rowanpaw came stalking out of the elders' den, her head and her tail held high as she headed for the gorse tunnel. Her amber eyes blazed with anger. Squirrelpaw emerged behind her, his jaws clamped on a bundle of bedding moss. He looked worried.

"Rowanpaw!" Sandstar called. "What's the matter?"

For a heartbeat he thought the apprentice was going to ignore him. Then she veered sharply to stand in front of him. "Speckletail!" she spat. "If ever a cat asked to have his fur clawed off—"

"You shouldn't talk like that about an elder," Sandstar rebuked her. "Speckletail's given good service to the Clan and we should respect that."

"What about a bit of respect for me?" Rowanpaw was so furious she seemed to have forgotten she was talking to her leader. "Just because I was a little late going to clear out the old bedding, Speckletail said that Goldenstar had never wanted to serve the elders either, and he could see I was going to turn out just like my father." She scraped her claws on the sandy floor of the clearing as if she were picturing the old tom-s fur. "It's not the first time he's said things, either. I don't see why I should have to put up with it!"

While she was speaking, Squirrelpaw had come to join them,

putting down the moss he was carrying. "You know Speckletail's joints are aching because of the cold weather," he meowed.

"You're not my mentor!" Rowanpaw flared up at her brother. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Calm down, Rowanpaw," Sandstar mewed. He wanted to reassure her that no cat believed she would end up a murderer and traitor like her father, but he knew that wasn't entirely true. "You're doing very well as an apprentice, and you're going to make a great warrior. Sooner or later the Clan will see that."

"That's what I've been telling her," Squirrelpaw meowed, and added to his sister, "We've got to live down what Goldenstar did. That's the only way the Clan will believe in our loyalty."

"Some cats believe in it already," Silverstream put in, and Squirrelpaw flashed him a grateful glance.

The worst of Rowanpaw's fury was fading, though her amber eyes still burned. With a toss of her head she turned away, flinging her parting words over her shoulder as she stalked toward the gorse tunnel. "I'm going to fetch some fresh moss."

"I'm sorry, Sandstar," Squirrelpaw murmured when she had gone. "But Rowanpaw's right to be upset."

"I know," Sandstar reassured him. "If I can catch Speckletail at a good moment, I'll have a word with him."

"Thanks, Sandstar." Squirrelpaw dipped his head in gratitude, picked up his moss, and hurried after his sister.

Sandstar gazed worriedly after the two apprentices. He must talk to Speckletail, he decided, and soon. Constantly taunting the young cats about their parentage was not the way to ensure their loyalty to Thunderclan.

Realizing that Silverstream was still waiting patiently beside him, he mewed, "Okay, tell me what's on your mind."

"It's my kits," Silverstream confessed. "Ever since the Gathering, I

can't get them out of my mind. Blackclaw and Stonefur weren't there, so I couldn't ask them for news, but now that Goldenstar has essentially taken over Riverclan, I'm sure my kits are in danger."

Sandstar took a bite of vole and chewed thoughtfully. "I don't see why they should be at risk more than any other cat," he replied, swallowing his mouthful. "Goldenstar will want to look after all the apprentices to guarantee a strong fighting force."

Silverstream didn't look reassured. "But Goldenstar knows who their father is," he pointed out. "He hates me, and I'm worried that he'll take it out on Featherpaw and Brookpaw."

Sandstar realized that Silverstream had a fair point about Goldenstar's hostility. "What would you like to do?"

Silverstream blinked nervously, "I want you to come with me across the river and bring them back to Thunderclan."

Sandstar stared at his friend. "Are you completely mouse-brained? You're asking your Clan leader to stroll into Riverclan territory and steal a couple of apprentices?"

Silverstream scraped his forepaw on the ground. "Well, if you put it like that..."

"How else would you put it?" Sandstar tried to control his shock, but Silverstream's suggestion was too close to Brokentail's old crime of stealing kits. If Sandstar agreed and Riverclan found out about it, they would be justified in attacking Thunderclan. And with Shadowclan to help them, that was a risk Sandstar couldn't take.

"I knew you wouldn't listen." Silverstream turned and began to retreat, his tail drooping.

"I *am* listening. Silverstream, come back and let's think about this." As Silverstream stopped, Sandstar went on: "You don't *know* that Featherpaw and Brookpaw are in danger. And they're apprentices now, not kits. They have the right to decide their own future. What if they want to stay in Riverclan?"

"I know." Silverstream sounded despairing. "Don't worry, Sandstar. I

understand there's nothing you can do to help."

"I didn't say that." Against all his better judgment, Sandstar knew he couldn't stand by and do nothing to help his friend. Silverstream pricked his ears, half-hopeful, as Sandstar went on: "Suppose we go over there quietly, just the two of us, and check on them? If they're okay, then you won't need to worry any more. If they're not, I'll tell them there's a place for them in Thunderclan, if that's what they choose."

Silverstream's blue eyes had begun to glow as Sandstar spoke. "That's great!" he meowed. "Thanks, Sandstar. Can we go now?"

"If you like. Let me finish this vole first. You find Brindleface and tell him he's in charge of the camp. But don't tell him where we're going," he added quickly.

Silverstream bounded off to the warriors' den while Sandstar swallowed the last few gulps of vole and swiped his tongue over his mouth. By the time he had finished, Silverstream had reappeared and the two friends headed for the mouth of the gorse tunnel.

Reaching it, however, they stopped short as a familiar black and white shape slipped into the clearing.

"Patchpaw!" Sandstar exclaimed happily. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see *you*," Patchpaw responded, touching noses in greeting with Sandstar and then with Silverstream. "Silverstream, I haven't see you in moons! How are you?"

"I'm fine. It's easy to see you're doing well," he added, eyeing Patchpaw's glossy black and white pelt.

"I came to pay my respects to Oakstar," Patchpaw explained. "You remember, Sandstar, you said I could."

"Yes, of course." Sandstar glanced at Silverstream, whose paws were working urgently in his haste to be off. "Patchpaw, can you go and find Cinderpelt? He'll show you the place where Oakstar is buried. Silverstream and I are just off on a mission."

"That sounds like the old days!" meowed Patchpaw, half enviously. "What is it this time?"

"We're going over to Riverclan to check on my kits," Silverstream told her in a rush. "I'm worried about them, now that Goldenstar is taking over."

Patchpaw's shocked look reminded Sandstar that she knew nothing of the recent developments in the forest. Rapidly he told the black and white cat what Goldenstar had announced at the last Gathering.

"But that's a disaster!" Patchpaw hissed when he had finished. "Is there anything I can do to help? I could come with you."

Her eyes were gleaming. Sandstar guessed Patchpaw was excited by the prospect of adventure. How different she was now from the nervous apprentice she had once been, bullied by her fierce mentor, Goldenstar!

"All right," he meowed, trusting his instincts that it would be good to have Patchpaw with them. "We'll be glad to have you."

As he bounded through the forest, his two oldest friends by his side, Sandstar felt his mind flood with memories of how they had trained and hunted together as apprentices. For a short time he could almost imagine that those days had returned, that he had shed his responsibilities like falling leaves and was young and carefree again.

But he knew that this impossible. He was Clan leader now, and he could never escape from his duty to the cats who depended on him.

The sun had gone down by the time that Sandstar and his friends reached the edge of the forest. Warning Silverstream and Patchpaw to stay back, Sandstar crept through the undergrowth until he could look out over the river.

In front of him lay the stepping stones, the easiest route into Riverclan territory. As Sandstar peered at the cold, gray water, he caught a strong scent of cats—Riverclan and Shadowclan mixed. A patrol was making its way along the opposite bank. They were too

far away for Sandstar to be sure which cats they were, but he could not see the black and blue-gray pelts of Blackclaw and Stonefur.

He felt a pang of disappointment. If either of their friends had been near the border, Silverstream could have asked them for news and the matter could have ended there. Now they would have to go right into Riverclan territory.

Sandstar knew he was risking everything on slipping in and slipping out again quietly, unobserved. If it were ever found out that a Clan leader had trespassed on another Clan's territory, he would be in trouble. But he knew that he had to do it for Silverstream.

The silver tabby warrior had crept up bride him. "What's the matter?" he whispered. "Why are we waiting here?"

Sandstar angled his ears toward the patrol. A moment later they disappeared into a reed bed and their scent slowly faded.

"Okay, let's go," Sandstar meowed.

Leading the way, he leaped from one stepping stone to another across the black, swiftly flowing water. He thought back to the floods of last leaf-bare, when he and Silverstream had almost drowned saving the lives of two of Blackclaw's kits. Leopardstar had conveniently forgotten that now, Sandstar realized, as well as how the two Thunderclan warriors had helped the starving cats of Riverclan by taking them fresh-kill from their own hunting grounds.

But there was no point in thinking about that now. Reaching the far bank, Sandstar slid into the shelter of a clump of reeds and checked once again that no enemy cats were near. All he could scent was the traces of the patrol, steadily growing fainter.

Treading softly, he made his way upriver toward the Riverclan camp. Silverstream and Patchpaw followed, silent as shadows.

Suddenly a now scent drifted on the breeze. Sandstar paused, his whiskers twitching. His eyes widened as he recognized the reek of carrion, crow-food that had rotted for days until its foul stench poisoned the air.

"Ugh! What's that?" growled Patchpaw, forgetting the need for silence.

Sandstar swallowed the bile that rose into his throat. "I don't know. I'd say it was a foxhole, but there's not scent of fox."

"It stinks, whatever it is," Silverstream muttered. "Come on, Sandstar, we need to keep going before some cat catches us."

"No," Sandstar meowed. "I know you're worried about your kits, Silverstream, but this is too strange. We have to investigate."

A few tail-lengths ahead, a tiny stream flowed sluggishly into the main river. Sandstar turned to follow it through more reeds. The stench grew stronger, and beneath the smell of crow-food he began to pick up the scent of many cats, a mixture of Shadowclan and Riverclan like the patrol. He halted and signaled for his friends to do the same as he began to make out noises from somewhere ahead: movement in the reeds and the voices of cats mingling together.

"What *is* this?" Silverstream whispered. "We're nowhere near the camp."

Sandstar flicked the tip of his tail for silence. At least the stench would mask their Thunderclan scent and make it easier for them to stay hidden.

More cautiously than ever Sandstar crept on again until the reeds began to thin out and he came to the edge of a clearing. Flattening himself against the damp ground he crawled as far forward as he dared and looked out.

At once he had to clamp his teeth hard to keep back a yowl of shock and anger. The stream ran along one side of the clearing, its near-stagnant waters clogged by the remains of fresh-kill carelessly flung there and left to rot. Cats crouched on the bank, tearing at prey. But that was not what had roused Sandstar's fury.

Opposite his hiding place, on the far side of the clearing was a vast hill of bones. They gleamed like stripped branches in the last of the watery daylight, some tiny shrew bones hardly bigger than teeth,

others as big as the leg bone of a fox or a badger.

Icy trembling seized Sandstar's body. For a heartbeat he thought he was back in his dream at Fourtrees. He remembered the blood that had come oozing out of that hill of bones, and longed to flee in terror. But this was far worse than the dream because Sandstar knew that it was happening now, in the real world. And crouched on top of the pile, his fur almost white against the sun-bleached remains, was Goldenstar, leader of the new united Clan.

Sandstar forced himself to stay hidden. He had to find out what Goldenstar was doing. Silverstream and Patchpaw crept forward to crouch beside him. Patchpaw's fur bristled, and Silverstream looked as if he were going to be sick.

After the first shock ebbed, Sandstar examined the scene more closely. The hill was made up of only prey bones, not mixed with cat bones like the one in his dream. On one side of it stood the Shadowclan deputy, Blackfoot. On the other side was Leopardstar. His gaze flicked nervously back and forth across the clearing. Sandstar wondered if he regretted what had happened to his Clan, and he guessed that his ambition to make his Clan strong had blinded him to Goldenstar's real nature. But whatever the former Riverclan leader felt, it was too late for him to go back now.

"I can't see my kits," Silverstream whispered, a breath of sound close to Sandstar's ear.

Blackclaw and Stonefur weren't there either, Sandstar realized. In fact, most of the cats in the clearing came from Shadowclan, though he spotted the Riverclan warriors Mistyfoot and Heavystep. There was no sign of either medicine cats, and Sandstar wondered if that was significant.

He was still watching, too stunned to know what to do next, when Goldenstar rose to his paws. A few small bones rattled down the side of the hill. The pale tabby's eyes blazed in the fading light as he let out a triumphant yowl.

"Cats of Tigerclan, gather here around the Bonehill for a Clan meeting!"

Immediately the cats in the clearing approached the hill, crouching low in respect. Others appeared from the reeds.

"He must have built that hill to look like the Highrock." Patchpaw murmured. "So he can look down on his Clan."

The pale tabby waited until his warriors were all in place and then announced, "It is time for the trial to begin. Fetch the prisoners!"

Sandstar exchanged a bewildered look with Silverstream. Where had Goldenstar found prisoners? Had he already mounted an attack on Windclan?

At Goldenstar's order, a Shadowclan warrior—Jaggedtooth, who had been one of Brokentail's rogues—vanished into the reeds. She returned a few moments later dragging another cat with her. At first Sandstar did not recognize the skinny gray warrior, her fur unkempt and one ear shredded and bleeding. Then, as Jaggedtooth pushed her into the circle of cats beneath the Bonehill, Sandstar realized it was Stonefur.

Sandstar felt Silverstream stiffen beside him, and put out a warning paw for his friend not to give them away. Silverstream's ears twitched but he stayed still and silent, watching.

The reeds parted again. This time Sandstar knew at once the cat who stepped into the clearing, her fur sleek and her head raised proudly. It was Darkstripe. *Traitor!* Sandstar thought, his belly clenching in anger.

More movement in the reeds heralded the arrival of another Shadowclan warrior who was shepherding two smaller cats, one a silver gray tabby and the other with thick brown tabby fur. They were as thin as Stonefur, their steps unsteady as they staggered into the clearing. Huddling together in the shadow of the Bonehill, they looked around them with wide, scared eyes.

An icy chill gripped Sandstar's muscles. The two young cats were Silverstream's kits, Featherpaw and Brookpaw.

Chapter 15

Silverstream growled deep in his throat and gathered himself to spring.

"No!" Sandstar gasped, leaping on his friend before he could leave the shadow of the reeds. "If Goldenstar sees us, we're crow-food!"

On Silverstream's other side Patchpaw grabbed him by one shoulder. "Sandstar's right," he hissed. "What chance would we have against all these cats?"

Silverstream writhed desperately, as if he hadn't heard. "Let me go!" he snarled. "I'll flay that piece of fox dung! I'll rip his heart out!"

"No!" Sandstar repeated in an agonized whisper. "We'll be slaughtered if we show ourselves now. We won't leave your kits, Silverstream, I promise we won't, but we've got to wait for the right moment to rescue them."

Silverstream went on struggling for a moment longer, then subsided with a grunt of agreement. Sandstar let him go, nodding to Patchpaw to do the same.

"Listen," he murmured. "Let's find out what's going on."

While they had been holding Silverstream down, Goldenstar had begun to speak, his voice drowning the noise of their scuffle among the reeds.

"Cats of Tigerclan," he began, "you all know the hardships that we have to face. The cold of leaf-bare threatens us. Twolegs threaten us. The other two Clans in the forest, who have not yet realized the wisdom of joining with Tigerclan, are a threat to us."

Sandstar's tail-tip twitched in anger and he flashed a look at Silverstream. *Goldenstar* was a threat! All that Thunderclan and Windclan wanted was to get on with their lives in peace, according to the ancient traditions of Starclan and the warrior code.

But Silverstream's burning gaze was fixed on his two kits, cowering at the base of the Bonehill; he was unaware of Sandstar's glance.

"Surrounded as we are by enemies," Goldenstar went on, "we must be sure of the loyalty of our own warriors. There is no room in Tigerclan for the halfhearted. No room for cats who might waver in battle, or worse still, turn on their own Clanmates. Tigerclan will no tolerate traitors!"

Except the traitor who leads it, Sandstar thought. *Or Darkstripe, who would have watched her own Clan be devoured by dogs.*

The cats in the clearing broke out into yowls of agreement. Goldenstar allowed the clamor to continue for a moment before signaling with his tail for silence. The noise died and he began to speak again.

"Especially we will not tolerate the abomination of half-Clan cats. No loyal warrior would ever take a mate from another Clan, diluting the pure blood that our warrior ancestors decreed for us. Oakstar and Silverstream of Thunderclan both flouted the warrior code when they took mates from Riverclan. The kits of such a union, like the ones you see in front of you now, can never be trusted."

He paused, and his deputy Blackfoot yowled out, "Filth! Filth!"

Darkstripe took up the cry, and a chorus of yowls and screeches echoed her words. This time Goldenstar let them fall quiet in their own time, gazing out over the cats below him with a look of calm satisfaction.

He and Blackfoot must have rehearsed all this, Sandstar realized in horror.

He noticed that it was the Shadowclan warriors who yowled the loudest. The Riverclan cats joined in less enthusiastically; Sandstar guessed they might not all fully agree with the Shadowclan leader, but they did not dare stay silent.

The two half-Clan apprentices flattened themselves close to the

ground, as if they were afraid of being swept away in the gale of the Clan's fury. Stonefur crouched over them as if she could protect them, gazing around with defiance in her eyes.

Where is Blackclaw? Sandstar wondered. *Goldenstar knows she's half-Clan too. What has he done with her?*

Goldenstar spoke again. "Half-Clan cats have been tolerated until now, but the time for tolerance has passed. There is no place in Tigerclan for warriors who owe allegiance to two Clans. How can we trust them not to betray our secrets, or even turn on us and kill us? Can we expect Starclan to fight on our side if we allow those who are not pure in heart and blood to walk freely among us?"

"No!" Darkstripe screeched, flexing her claws and lashing her tail from side to side.

"No, my friends. We must get rid of the abomination in our midst! Then our Clan will be clean again and we can be sure of the favor of Starclan."

Stonefur sprang to her paws. She was so weak that she stumbled and almost fell, but she managed to stay upright and face Goldenstar.

"No cat has ever questioned my loyalty," she snarled. "Come down here and tell me to my face that I'm a traitor!"

Sandstar wanted to wail aloud at the blue-gray warrior's hopeless courage. Goldenstar could have swatted her aside with one paw, and yet Stonefur still remained defiant.

"Blackclaw and I never even knew that Oakstar was our mother until a couple of moons ago," Stonefur insisted. "We have been loyal Riverclan warriors all our lives. Let any cat who thinks different come out here and prove it!"

Goldenstar angrily swept his tail toward Leopardstar. "You showed poor judgment when you chose this cat as your deputy," he growled. "Riverclan is choked by the weeds of teachery, and we must root them out."

To Sandstar's dismay, Leopardstar bowed his head. The gesture showed just how far Goldenstar's power extended, that the once-formidable Riverclan leader was unable or unwilling to protect his own deputy.

Yet the pale tabby's words gave Sandstar hope. It sounded as if Goldenstar was about to banish Stonefur and the two apprentices. If he did, then Sandstar and his friends could wait for them at the border, ready to take them back to Thunderclan, where they would be safe.

When Goldenstar spoke again, his voice was measured and cold. "Stonefur, I will give you a chance to show your loyalty to Tigerclan. Kill these two half-Clan apprentices."

An eerie silence spread through the clearing, broken only by Silverstream's gasp of outrage. Luckily the Tigerclan warriors were so intent on the scene in front of them that no cat heard him.

"Sandstar!" Silverstream whispered. "We *must* do something!" His claws dug into the ground and his muscles bunched, ready to spring, yet his eyes were fixed on Sandstar as if he would not attack without his leader's order.

Patchpaw's eyes, bright with distress, turned to Sandstar. "We can't just watch them die!"

Sandstar could feel his fur prickling with tension. He knew he could not stay crouching here in hiding while Silverstream's kits were slaughtered a few foxlengths away. If all else failed, he was ready to give up his life in a battle to save them.

"Wait just a moment," he murmured. "Let's see what Stonefur does."

The blue-gray warrior had turned to face Leopardstar. "I take orders from you," he growled. "You must know this is wrong. What do you want me to do?"

For a heartbeat Leopardstar looked uncertain, and again Sandstar began to hope that he would take a stand against Goldenstar and stop the destruction of his Clan. But he had underestimated the

strength of his ambition, and his misguided faith that Goldenstar offered an invincible future. "These are difficult times," he meowed at last. "As we fight for survival we must be able to count on ever one of our Clanmates. There is no room for divided loyalties. Do as Goldenstar tells you."

Stonefur held his gaze for a moment more, a moment that to Sandstar seemed to last for several moons. Then she faced the two apprentices and they shrank away from her, their eyes glazed with terror.

Brookpaw gave his brother a comforting lick. "We'll fight her," he promised. "I won't let her kill us."

Brave words, Sandstar thought desperately. Stonefur was a skilled, experienced warrior, and even in her weakened state she was a formidable threat to two half-trained apprentices who had obviously been ill-treated and imprisoned as well.

The Riverclan warrior gave a little nod to Brookpaw, just like any mentor approving of her apprentice's courage. Then she turned to look up at Goldenstar again.

"You'll have to kill me first, Goldenstar!" she spat.

Narrowing his eyes, Goldenstar flicked his tail at Darkstripe. "Very well. Kill her," he ordered.

The black-striped warrior crouched low, every hair on her pelt quivering with joy that Goldenstar had given her a chance to prove her loyalty to her new Clan. With a grunt of effort, she hurled herself at Stonefur.

Pity and fear throbbed through Sandstar. He could see only one end to the fight. The blue-gray warrior was so weak that she would be no match for Darkstripe. Sandstar wanted to leap into the clearing and fight on Stonefur's side, but he knew it would be suicidal in the presence of so many enemy cats. He knew that he had to hold back in the hope, however slight, of saving the apprentices. Sandstar had scarcely known an ordeal worse than the one he faced now, remaining hidden while his friend was slaughtered.

Yet Stonefur's skills had not deserted her. Quick as lightning, she dropped backward so that instead of landing on her shoulders Darkstripe was faced with all four paws, claws extended to rip at her fur.

Sandstar felt his throat tighten. He remembered a day during his apprenticeship when Stonefur's mother, Oakstar, had taught him that very move. *Oakstar, if you can see this, help her now!* he begged.

The two warriors were a clawing, screech knot of fur on the floor of the clearing. The rest of the cats scrambled backward to give them space, still keeping the same eerie silence. They were so intent on the battle, Sandstar wondered for a moment if this might be the best time to rescue the apprentices. But Goldenstar was still crouched on top of the Bonehill, with a clear view of the whole clearing, and he would easily see them coming.

Stonefur had fastened her teeth into Darkstripe's scruff and was trying to shake the dark warrior, but Darkstripe's greater size and strength were too much. She lost her grip and the two warriors sprang apart, breathing hard. Blood was trickling from a scratch above Darkstripe's left eye, and clumps of fur were missing from her flank. Stonefur's pelt was even more ragged, and as she shook one forepaw spots of blood spattered on the ground.

"Get a move on, Darkstripe!" Blackfoot jeered. "You're fighting like a kittypet!"

With a hiss of fury Darkstripe launched another attack, but Stonefur was ready for her again. Slipping to one side, she raked her claws down Darkstripe's side, and followed up with a blow to her back legs as the dark warrior crashed past her. Stonefur staggered from the force of the impact, but by the time Darkstripe regained her paws, she had recovered. This time the Riverclan warrior went on the attack, bowling Darkstripe over and fastening teeth and claws in her neck.

Sandstar heard Silverstream's intake of breath. His blue eyes were blazing; on his other side Patchpaw was sinking her unsheathed claws into the ground. Sandstar felt hope burn in his belly. Was it possible that Stonefur could win?

But Goldenstar had no intention of letting Stonefur escape. As Darkstripe struggled vainly to break free, the massive tabby flicked his ears at Blackfoot. "Finish it," he ordered.

The Shadowclan deputy flung herself into the battle. She bit Stonefur in the shoulder and dragged her off Darkstripe, ducking to avoid her flailing paws. Darkstripe sprang on Stonefur to hold her hindquarters down, while Blackfoot scored her claws across the blue-gray warrior's throat.

Stonefur let out a gurgling cry that was cut short. Both Tigerclan cats released her and stood back. Stonefur's body convulsed as blood welled from her throat.

A thin wailing noise went up from the watching cats, strengthening into a cry of triumph. Even Leopardstar, after a brief hesitation, joined in. The two apprentices were the only cats to remain silent, their terrified eyes fixed on the warrior who had died to save them.

Sandstar could only stare in horror as Stonefur went limp and the last breath left her body.

Chapter 16

Author's Note: Sorry for not posting this chapter yesterday! I was almost done until I was swept away by family to a party. I forgot to publish it when I got home. Happy New Years everyone!!!

"No." Silverstream's voice rasped in his throat.

Sandstar pressed closer to his friend, sharing his grief at Stonefur's death and his anger that the Riverclan warrior's courage had been worth nothing in an unfair fight.

Blackfoot looked down at Stonefur's body in satisfaction.

Darkstripe whirled to confront the two apprentices. "Goldenstar," she meowed, "let *me* kill them."

Silverstream would have sprung forward then, in spite of anything Sandstar could do, but before he could move Goldenstar shook his battle-scarred head. "Really, Darkstripe? A prisoner can defeat you, but you think you could take on two apprentices?"

Darkstripe bowed her head in shame. Her leader's eyes narrowed coldly as he stared at the two young cats. They were huddled together, trembling with shock. They hardly seemed to realize that their own live were hanging by a hair.

"No," Goldenstar meowed at last. "For now I will let them live. They may be useful to me alive."

Sandstar flashed a look at Silverstream, who returned his glance with mingled relief and apprehension in his eyes.

Goldenstar summoned Jaggedtooth. "Take the apprentices back to their prison."

The Shadowclan warrior dipped her head and herded the two stunned cats away through the reeds. Silverstream's hungry gaze

followed them out of sight.

"The meeting is at an end," Goldenstar declared.

At once the cats in the clearing began to slip away. Goldenstar leaped down from the Bonehill and vanished into the reeds, flanked by Blackfoot and Darkstripe. Eventually only Leopardstar was left. He padded forward until he stood over the broken body of his former deputy. Slowly he bent his head and nosed Stonefur's torn gray pelt. If he meowed a last farewell, Sandstar did not hear it, and after a moment he turned and followed Goldenstar through the reeds.

"Now!" Silverstream sprang to his paws. "Sandstar, we've got to rescue my kits."

"Yes, but don't go rushing off," Sandstar warned him. "We have to make sure all the cats have gone."

His friend's body was quivering with suppressed tension. "I don't care!" he spat. "If they try to stop us, I'll rip them all apart."

"The kits are safe for the moment," murmured Patchpaw. "There's no need to take risks."

Sandstar cautiously raised his head above the level of the reeds. By now it was quite dark; the only light came from Silverpelt and a pale glow from the moon low in the sky. The Shadowclan and Riverclan scents were rapidly fading. The only sound was the dry rustle of wind in the reeds.

Crouching down again, Sandstar murmured, "They've gone for now. This is our chance. We've got to find where they're keeping the apprentices, and—"

"And get them away," Silverstream interrupted. "Whatever it takes."

Sandstar nodded. "Patchpaw, are you up for it? It will be dangerous."

The loner's eyes widened. "You think I'd leave, after we saw *that*? No way. I'm with you, Sandstar."

"Good." Sandstar blinked in gratitude. "I thought you would be."

Beckoning his two friends with his tail, he led the way into the clearing, his pawsteps growing hesitant as he left the shelter of the reeds. He knew what he was doing was against the warrior code, but what Goldenstar had done had left him no alternative. He did not know how his warrior ancestors could have watched the slaughter of Stonefur without doing anything to save her.

Creeping close to the ground, the three cats reached the stream where rotting fresh-kill lay strewn along the bank. In the midst of his cold fury, Sandstar spared a moment to be angry at the waste of prey in such a hard season.

"Look at that!" he hissed.

"But we could roll in it," Patchpaw suggested. "It'll disguise our scent."

Sandstar gave her a brief nod, approval calming his anger. Patchpaw was thinking like a warrior. Sandstar crouched down and pressed his fur into the decaying carcass of a rabbit. Silverstream and Patchpaw followed. The silver tabby warrior's eyes were like chips of blue flint.

When all three cats were thoroughly covered with the scent of crow-food, Sandstar headed into the reeds where he had seen Jaggedtooth disappear with the two apprentices. There was a narrow path along the frozen mud, as if cats regularly came and went that way. All Sandstar's sense were alert.

As they headed away from the river toward the farmland on the other side of Riverclan territory, the reeds thinned out and the ground rose. When Sandstar and his friends came to the edge of the cover, they saw a grassy slope in front of them with an occasional clump of gorse and hawthorn. About halfway up a dark hole yawned in the hillside. Jaggedtooth was crouched outside it.

"There are pawprints leading into that hole," Sandstar murmured.

Silverstream lifted his muzzle to taste the air and let out a faint

sound of disgust. "Sick cats," he meowed quietly. "You're right, Sandstar; this is the place." He bared his teeth. "Jaggedtooth is mine."

"No." Sandstar's tail whipped out, signaling his friend to stay where he was. "We can't afford a fight. The noise would bring every cat in the territory. We have to get rid of her another way."

"I can do that." Patchpaw's paws anxiously kneaded the ground, but her expression was determined. "She'll recognize you two, but she doesn't know me."

Sandstar hesitated, then nodded. "How will you do it?"

"I've got a plan." Patchpaw's eyes shone with anticipation, and Sandstar realized that the loner was almost relishing the danger, as if she had missed having a chance to use her warrior skills. "Don't worry; it'll be fine," the black and white cat assured him.

Straightening up, she strolled out of the reeds and up the slope, her head and tail high. Jaggedtooth got up and paced forward to meet her, the tabby fur on her neck bristling.

Sandstar gathered himself, ready to spring if the Shadowclan warrior attacked. But though Jaggedtooth looked aggressive, she did nothing more than give Patchpaw a suspicious sniff.

"I don't know you," she growled. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Think you know all the Riverclan cats, do you?" Patchpaw inquired coolly. "I've got a message from Goldenstar."

Jaggedtooth grunted and her whiskers twitched as she sniffed Patchpaw again. "Great Starclan, you stink!"

"You don't smell so pleasant yourself," Patchpaw retorted. "Do you want this message or don't you?"

Sandstar and Silverstream exchanged a glance as Jaggedtooth hesitated. Sandstar felt his heart thud painfully against his ribs.

"Go on, then," the Shadowclan warrior meowed at last.

"Goldenstar wants you to go to him at once," mewed Patchpaw. "He sent me to take your place guarding the prisoners."

"What?" Jaggedtooth lashed her tail in disbelief. "Only Shadowclan guards the prisoners. You Riverclan cats are all too soft. Why did Goldenstar send you and not one of our own Clan?"

Sandstar flinched. Patchpaw had made a potentially fatal mistake.

But the loner didn't seem bothered. Turning away, she meowed. "I thought we were supposed to be all one Clan now. But suit yourself. I'll tell Goldenstar you wouldn't come."

"No, wait." Jaggedtooth twitched her ears. "I didn't say that. If Goldenstar wants me... Where is he, then?"

"Over there." Patchpaw pointed with his tail in the direction of the Riverclan camp. "He had Darkstripe and Blackfoot with him."

Jaggedtooth made up her mind. "Right," she muttered. "But you stay out here till I get back. If I smell your stink inside the hole I'll rip your fur off."

She headed down the slope. Patchpaw watched her go, then padded up and sat down just outside the hole. Sandstar and Silverstream crouched in the reeds as Jaggedtooth passed within a couple of tail-lengths of them. She was hurrying now, and did not even stop to scent the air as she vanished down the path.

Once she had gone, Sandstar and Silverstream bounded across the open ground to join Patchpaw. Silverstream paused briefly to sniff and meowed, "Yes! They're in there!" before he vanished inside the hole.

Sandstar stopped in front of Patchpaw. "Well done!"

Patchpaw licked her paw and drew it over her ear two or three times to hide her embarrassment. "It was easy. She's such a stupid furball."

"Yes, but she'll know something's up as soon as she finds Goldenstar," Sandstar pointed out. "Keep watch, and call out if you see any cat." With a last glance behind him, he plunged into the hole after Silverstream.

He found himself in a long, narrow passage carved out of the sandy soil. Thick darkness engulfed him after the first few tail-lengths. There was a lingering scent of fox, but it was faint and stale, as if the original occupant of the hole were long gone. Stronger by far was the fear-scent rising from the darkness, the scent of cats who had given up all hope.

The passage led steadily downward. Before he reached the end of it, Sandstar heard the sound of scuffling and surprised mews. One of the apprentices called out, "Father? Is it really you?"

A moment later Sandstar could no longer feel his fur brushing the passage walls on either side. His next step brought him up against a cat's haunches; he recognized Silverstream by his scent. The scent of two apprentices was stronger than ever, and with a jolt of relief Sandstar recognized Silverstream by his scent. The scent of the two apprentices was stronger than ever, and with a jolt of relief Sandstar recognized another cat.

"Blackclaw!" he exclaimed. "Thank Starclan we've found you."

"Is that Sandstar?" Blackclaw's voice was hoarse, close to his ear. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story," Sandstar replied. "I'll tell you everything, but first we have to get out of here. Silverstream, are you ready?"

A tense mew of agreement came from his friend. Though Sandstar couldn't see him, he could picture him huddled close to Featherpaw and Brookpaw.

"Let's go," Sandstar meowed, turning with difficulty in the narrow mouth of the underground den. "Blackclaw, we're going to take you all back to Thunderclan with us." Remembering how weak Stonefur and the apprentices had looked, he added, "Can you make it that far?"

"Once I'm out of this hole I can make it anywhere," Blackclaw mewed determinedly.

"So can we," added Featherpaw.

"That's great. Blackclaw, I'm so sorry, but we couldn't rescue Stonefur..." Sandstar began, looking for words to tell the she-cat about her sister's death.

"I already know," meowed Blackclaw, her voice ragged with grief. "The apprentices told me. They say she died bravely."

"Very bravely. All Starclan will honor her." Sandstar pushed his muzzle into Blackclaw's fur, a gesture of comfort. "Come on. We'll make sure she didn't die for nothing. Goldenstar will not hurt you as well."

His heart thudding with fear, Sandstar scrabbled his way back up the tunnel. At the top he paused to check that it was safe to emerge, then led the way into the open. He felt as if the rancid stench of the prison would cling to his fur forever. Patchpaw took her place at the back of the group, keeping a lookout as they crept down the slope.

Silent as shadows, the cats followed the path through the reeds until they came to the clearing again. It was empty, the Bonehill casting its ominous shadows as far as the body of Stonefur lying still in the moonlight.

Blackclaw went over to her sister and bent her head to nose her fur. Outside the darkness of her prison, Sandstar saw that she was as skinny and unkempt as the dead warrior, every rib showing, her fur matted and her eyes dull with suffering.

"Stonefur, Stonefur," she murmured. "What will I do without you?"

Sandstar's fur bristled with tension as he listened for the sound of approaching cats, but he forced himself to give Blackclaw time to mourn. They could not take Stonefur's body with them for the proper warrior's vigil; this was Blackclaw's last farewell.

Brookpaw, who had been Stonefur's apprentice, approached as well.

He touched his nose to his mentor's head before padding back to stand beside his father.

Sandstar could not help remembering Oakstar, and how much she had loved her lost kits. Had she been here, he wondered, to lead her daughter to Starclan? She and Stonefur had both died bravely, their cruel deaths caused by Goldenstar's evil ambition. Every hair on Sandstar's pelt prickled with his longing to confront the pale tabby warrior and make him pay for his crimes.

"Sandstar, we have to go," Silverstream hissed, the whites of his eyes bright in the half-light.

His words roused Blackclaw. Before Sandstar could reply, she raised her head, gave Stonefur one last, loving look, and padded over to where the others were waiting for her.

Sandstar set a brisk pace back toward the river, feeling himself relax as the stench of the Bonehill and the scattered prey began to fade. Silverstream helped the two apprentices along, encouraging them with gentle nudges and mews. Blackclaw kept up bravely, limping on paws cracked and sore after her imprisonment, while Patchpaw stayed at the rear, her ears tilted back for the sounds of pursuit.

The night was silent except for the murmur of water, and by the time the river came in sight they had not encountered any other cats. Turning downstream toward the stepping stones, Sandstar dared to hope that they would escape undetected.

Then a distant yowling sounded through the reeds and the six cats froze in their tracks.

"The prisoners have escaped!"

Chapter 17

Author's Note: How about an extra chapter as an apology? :)

"Quick—the stepping stones!" Sandstar hissed.

Alone, the Thunderclan cats could have raced easily out of danger, but none of them would abandon the prisoners. Silverstream fell back to join Patchpaw as rearguard, while Sandstar tried to urge on the Riverclan cats.

"You'll have to leave us!" Blackclaw gasped. "There's no sense in all of us being captured."

"Never!" snarled Silverstream. "We're all in this together."

By now they were bounding alongside the river, the Riverclan cats stumbling in their efforts to keep up. Sandstar could already see the ripples in the water where the current was broken by the stepping stones. But the yowling behind them grew louder, and when he turned his head to draw in a rapid gulp of air he could taste the scent of Shadowclan.

"Great Starclan!" he whispered. "They're catching up."

None of the pursuing cats had appeared yet by the time they reached the stepping stones. Sandstar leaped onto the first stone, then the second, and gestured with his tail for Blackclaw to follow.

"Hurry!" he urged.

Blackclaw bent her hind legs and leaped, staggering as her paws hit the slippery surface, but managing to keep her balance. The two apprentices came next. Sandstar stopped when he was halfway across and waited, the river water lapping his paws, while the other cats leaped out behind him.

Because the Riverclan cats were so weak they were agonizingly slow, bracing themselves for each leap. Blackclaw reached him first,

and Sandstar edged to the side of the stone to let her go past. The two apprentices were still someway behind. Sandstar's claws scraped the rough stone in his impatience, though he tried to stay calm. When the first dark shapes of pursuing cats slipped out of the reeds he forced himself to say nothing. Brookpaw was just nerving himself to leap; Sandstar locked his gaze with the younger cat's. "Come on," he mewed steadily. "You're doing fine."

But as his brother gathered himself, Featherpaw, a couple of stones behind him, spotted the Shadowclan warriors racing along the riverbank. "They're coming!" he yowled.

Caught off balance, Brookpaw misjudged the distance and fell short. His forepaws landed on the stone, but his hindquarters splashed into the river. The current bubbled around him, dragging at his thick fur as he scrabbled to pull himself to safety.

"I'm slipping!" He gasped. "I can't hold on!"

Sandstar jumped back onto the previous stone, barely managing to balance in the space left by Brookpaw's clawing forepaws. He fastened his teeth in the apprentice's scruff just as the younger cat lost his grip and slid backward into the river. For a few heartbeats Sandstar felt his own paws sliding on the smooth rock under Brookpaw's weight and the force of the current.

Then he spotted Silverstream swimming up behind his son, paws thrusting strongly through the icy water. The silver tabby warrior shoved his shoulder underneath Brookpaw and heaved him upward. Sandstar managed to haul the apprentice out to crouch shivering on the rock.

Glancing toward the Riverclan shore, Sandstar saw Patchpaw urging Featherpaw onto the next stone, getting her own paws wet to leave him space to stand on the driest part.

Behind them, the pursuing cats had reached the first stone. Blackfoot was in the lead, flanked by Jaggedtooth and three or four others—too many to fight, Sandstar realized.

"Come on!" he yowled. "Hurry!" he nudged the shivering Brookpaw.

"Keep going—follow Blackclaw!"

Blackfoot crouched, ready to spring, her eyes fixed on the stepping stone where Patchpaw had put herself between Featherpaw and the Shadowclan warrior. Sandstar's belly clenched. The loner was brave, but her training days were far behind her and she would be no match for a seasoned warrior like Goldenstar's deputy.

Silverstream began swimming back toward Patchpaw. A wild screech split the air as the rest of the Shadowclan warriors spread along the bank in a menacing line.

"Keep going!" Sandstar gasped to Blackclaw. "Take Brookpaw with you. I'm going back."

But before he could move, a fierce battle yowl went up from the forest on the Thunderclan side of the river. Sandstar saw three shapes streaking out of the undergrowth: Brightheart, with Fireheart and Blossomfall just behind him.

"Thank Starclan—" he began, breaking off as Brightheart leaped toward the river, eyes blazing and claws extended. He was heading straight for Blackclaw, who was just jumping from the last stone onto the bank.

Sandstar raced across the remaining stones to intercept the white and ginger warrior, barreling into his side and kncoking him off his paws. "Mouse-brain!" he snapped. "The enemy is back there."

He jerked his head toward the middle of the river, where Patchpaw and Silverstream were tusseling with Blackfoot on the central stone. Brookpaw was nerving himself for the last leap onto the bank, while Featherpaw huddled two or three stones farther back. Fireheart and Blossomfall launched themselves across the stones to face the Shadowclan warriors, the two apprentices cowering at the edge of their stones to let them pass.

Muttering "Sorry" to Blackclaw, Brightheart sprang after them. Sandstar bunched his muscles to follow, but before he leaped he saw Blackfoot slip off the stone to be swept away in the current. She ducked briefly below the surface of the water, then reappeared

swimming clumsily back toward the Riverclan side, her ears flat against her head. The three Thunderclan warriors stood crowded together on one stone, digging in their claws and growling fiercely at the remaining pursuers.

"You'll come no farther if you want to stay alive," snarled Fireheart.

The Shadowclan warriors milled about uncertainly on the first two or three stones. Unused to the river, they were unsteady on their paws and clearly unwilling to join battle with the furious Thunderclan cats.

"Get back!" Blackfoot yowled as she clambered onto the bank, her fur streaming. "Let them escape; they're only half-Clan crow-food."

Her warriors seemed happy to obey, and within moments all the Shadowclan cats had vanished into the reeds.

Sandstar concentrated on helping the two apprentices finish crossing. Silverstream and Patchpaw followed closely behind. Checking his cats for wounds, Sandstar saw the Silverstream had lost a clump of fur from one shoulder, and Patchpaw's left ear was bleeding, but otherwise they seemed unhurt.

"Well done, all of you," he meowed, turning to the other Thunderclan warriors. "I was never so glad to see any cats as when you three came out of the forest. What brought you here?"

"You did," Brightheart panted. "You ordered extra patrols to watch the border. Lucky for you that we came along when we did."

Sandstar felt his legs go weak with relief. Starclan had sent the patrol at just the right moment. "Okay," he meowed, "we'd better get back to camp. These three cats need to rest. Patchpaw, you'd better come too and let Cinderpelt look at that ear."

Sandstar stayed at the rear in case the Shadowclan warriors decided to cross the river after all, but behind them everything was quiet. After a few moment, Fireheart dropped back to join him.

"What happened?" she asked. "What are these Riverclan cats doing here?"

Sandstar paused to give her ear a quick lick. "They were prisoners," he explained. "If we'd left them there, Goldenstar would have killed them."

Fireheart turned her green gaze on him, horrified. "Why?"

"Because their parents came from different Clans," Sandstar explained. "Goldenstar says half-Clan cats aren't fit to live in any Clan."

"But his own kits are half-Clan!" Fireheart protested.

Sandstar shook his head. "No, because Goldenstar was a Thunderclan cat when they were born. At least, that would be his excuse. You don't think that the great Goldenstar would father anything but pure-blooded kits, do you?"

The shock and disgust in Fireheart's eyes deepened, then turned to sympathy as she looked at the Riverclan cats. "Poor things," she murmured. "Will you let them stay in Thunderclan?"

Sandstar nodded. "What else can we do?"

The moon was high and bathing the ravine in a silvery light by the time that Sandstar and the others reached the camp. Sandstar could hardly believe that everything could be so peaceful here, only a short distance from the bloodstained clearing of the Bonehill and all the violence unleashed by Goldenstar's ambition.

But as he emerged from the gorse tunnel into the camp, the illusion of peace was shattered. Brindleface came hurrying toward him with Sorreltail at his heels. The younger warrior looked distraught.

"Thank Starclan you're back, Sandstar!" he exclaimed. "It's Rowanpaw—she's disappeared!"

Chapter 18

"Disappeared?" Sandstar echoed in alarm. "What happened?"

"We're not sure." Brindleface was calmer than Sorreltail, but his eyes gave away his concern. "It was Squirrelpaw who first said he couldn't find her. I thought he was making a fuss about nothing, but we searched the camp. She isn't here, and no cat saw her leave."

"It's my fault!" Sorreltail broke in. "I'm her mentor."

"It's not your fault," Brindleface assured him. "I sent you on hunting patrol. No cat expects you to be in two places at once."

Sorreltail shook his head despairingly.

"Fetch Squirrelpaw," Sandstar ordered; Blossomfall bounded off at once to the apprentices' den.

While he waited, Sandstar sent Patchpaw and the three Riverclan cats to see Cinderpelt; Silverstream went with them to explain what had happened, and to assure himself that his kits would be all right. Though the silver tabby warrior was cold and drenched from the icy river, all his concern was for his kits, and as they crossed the clearing he stuck close to their side like a bulky shadow.

"I don't know what to think," meowed Brindleface when they had gone. "Maybe Rowanpaw got some idea into her head and went off by herself. She could be trapped or injured somewhere—"

"Or she could be in Shadowclan," Sorreltail interrupted, his fur bristling. "Goldenstar could have stolen her!"

"But Goldenstar was over in Riverclan territory," Sandstar told them quietly. "So were Blackfoot and Darkstripe." He saw Brindleface's ears twitch in surprise, and he knew he would have to explain everything to his deputy as soon as possible.

"He could have sent some other cat to do his dirty work," Brightheart put in.

"Have you scented Shadowclan cats around the camp?" Sandstar asked Brindleface. "Or Riverclan?"

The pale gray tabby warrior shook his head. "No cats but our own, Sandstar."

"Then it sounds as if she left willingly," Sandstar meowed. "Perhaps she just felt like hunting by herself for a change." But he couldn't help remembering the incident before he left the camp, when Rowanpaw had been furious with Speckletail for comparing her with her father. Sandstar wondered if he had misjudged how hurt she had felt.

He broke off his thoughts as Squirrelpaw came up. "Tell me what Rowanpaw did before she disappeared," Sandstar ordered.

"Just the usual apprentice chores." Squirrelpaw sounded anxious, his green eyes were wide and confused. "We changed the elders' bedding and brought them fresh-kill, and I went to get some mouse bile from Cinderpelt to put on a tick in Speckletail's fur. When I came back Rowanpaw had gone, and I haven't seen her since."

"Where have you looked so far?"

"I went back to where wee got the moss for the bedding, but she wasn't there," his apprentice replied. "And I checked the training hollow."

Sandstar nodded. "Did you ask the elders if she said anything to them?"

"I did," replied Brindleface, "but they couldn't remember anything out of the ordinary."

"And what about Tigerclaw?" Sandstar went on. "Did Rowanpaw say anything to her?"

Brindleface shook his head. "She was frantic. I sent her with Mousefur to search toward Tallpines. They aren't back yet."

"Did you try to track Rowanpaw?" Sandstar asked.

"Yes, of course," Sorreltail replied. "We tracked her to the top of the ravine, but after that we lost the scent."

Sandstar hesitated. More than anything he wanted to believe that there was an easy explanation for Rowanpaw's absence. Starclan forbid he should wish a young cat to be lying injured somewhere, but even that would be preferable to his worst fears, that Rowanpaw had gone willingly to join her father.

"I'll try again," he decided. "It's probably too late, but—"

"I'll come with you," Brightheart offered.

Sandstar gave him a nod of gratitude; Brightheart was one of the best trackers in the Clan. "Okay," he meowed. "Fireheart, Thornclaw, you come too."

Sandstar led the way out of the camp again. Exhaustion dragged at his paws; the night was half over, and so far he had not slept. He would have liked nothing better than to settle down in his den with a piece of fresh-kill, but he guessed it would be a long time before he could do that.

It was not difficult to pick up Rowanpaw's scent in the ravine, even though it was fading by now, but toward the top he lost it, as Sorreltail had done. Sandstar began to suspect that the young cat had leaped from rock to rock, where her scent would not linger, so as to confuse any cats who might try to follow her. Sandstar's worst fears flooded back; had Rowanpaw really been so unhappy in Thunderclan that she felt she had to leave?"

His thoughts were interrupted by a yowl from Brightheart among the bushes at the top of the ravine. "Over here! She went this way!"

When Sandstar bounded up to join him, he too could distinguish the faintest trace of Rowanpaw's scent. He and Brightheart followed it into the trees, noses to the ground as they focused on the traces of cat among all the stronger, distracting scents of prey. No other cat's scent joined Rowanpaw's. This far, at least, she had been alone.

Then, at the edge of a clearing, they lost the scent trail again, and not even Brightheart's sharp nose could pick it up.

A cold wind had sprung up, driving clouds across the moon and ruffling the cats' fur, and as Sandstar cast back and forth across the clearing in a last effort to find the scent again, a thin, icy rain began to fall.

"Mouse dung!" Brightheart spat. "That just about finishes us."

Reluctantly Sandstar agreed. Calling Fireheart and Blossomfall back from their own searches, he meowed, "Let's get back. We can't do any more."

Fireheart stood still for a moment, gazing in the direction that the scent trail had seemed to lead. "It looks as if she was heading for Fourtrees."

That made sense, Sandstar reflected. Fourtrees was the obvious place to go if Rowanpaw wanted to meet with a cat from another Clan, or to come into another Clan's territory. Every hair on his pelt prickled with dread. He couldn't persuade himself any longer that Rowanpaw had just wandered off to hunt, and he could see from the troubled looks of his warriors that they shared his growing conviction: Rowanpaw had gone to Shadowclan.

When the patrol returned to the camp, Sorreltail and Squirrelpaw were still anxiously waiting in the clearing. They had been joined by Rowanpaw's mother, Tigerclaw, and Mousefur. All four cats looked bedraggled and despairing in the rain that was falling more heavily now.

"Well?" Tigerclaw asked as Sandstar came up to her. "What did you find?"

"Nothing," Sandstar meowed quietly. "We don't know where she is."

"Then why aren't you still out there looking?" Tigerclaw's voice was sharp.

Sandstar shook his head. "There's nothing more we can do in the dark and the rain. She could be anywhere."

"You don't care, do you?" Tigerclaw's meow rose, high-pitched with anger. "You think she left deliberately! You never trusted her!"

Sandstar struggled to answer, knowing that her accusation was half-true. But Tigerclaw did not wait. Instead, she spun around and disappeared beneath the branches of the warriors' den.

"Wait!" Sandstar called, but she ignored him.

"She doesn't know what she's saying," Fireheart meowed sympathetically. "I'll go and calm her down." She slipped into the den behind Tigerclaw.

Tired and discouraged, Sandstar turned to Squirrelpaw, expecting a similar accusation from him. But his apprentice was standing quietly, and the look in his green eyes was unreadable.

"It's okay, Sandstar," he meowed. "I know you did all you could. Thank you." Head down and tail drooping, he made his way back to the apprentices' den.

Sandstar watched him go. Exhaustion flooded over him; it seemed like several moons since Silverstream had first suggested going to Riverclan to see his kits. A chilly gray dawn was beginning to seep into the sky, and Sandstar desperately needed to rest, but there was one more duty to perform first. He had to visit Cinderpelt, and make sure the Riverclan cats would recover from their ordeal.

As he padded across the clearing to the medicine cat's den, Sandstar felt all his doubts about his leadership welling up again. One warrior banished, and gone to join his enemy—and willing to kill to prove her new loyalties. One apprentice vanished. And the whole forest caught up in terror and hatred that Sandstar saw no way to combat. The vision of himself wearing the mane of Lionclan that he had seen in the stream seemed a long way away. If Starclan really had destined him for greatness, Sandstar couldn't help wondering if they had chosen the wrong cat.

Standing on the Highrock, Sandstar watched as his Clan emerged from their dens. It was the morning after his expedition to Riverclan territory, and he had called a meeting to tell his warriors exactly

what had happened, and to explain the presence of the three Riverclan cats.

Blackclaw and the two apprentices were sitting at the base of the Highrock with Silverstream and Cinderpelt. Sandstar was pleased to see that they already looked stronger, as if their energy was coming back after a good meal and with Cinderpelt's care.

Patchpaw had left at dawn, her injured ear swathed in cobweb and a gleam in her eyes as she recalled the battle on the stepping stones.

"Amazing how my old training came back to me," she meowed to Sandstar. "I hadn't forgotten the fighting moves."

"You did brilliantly," Sandstar purred. "You're a real friend to Thunderclan."

"Now that Goldenstar is rising to power, I think Thunderclan needs all the friends it can get," the loner mewed seriously.

Patchpaw had spent a few moments by Oakstar's grave and then set out for the farm near Highstones. Sandstar wondered if he would need to call on Patchpaw for help again. Goldenstar's enemies would have to unite to drive him out of the forest—yet Sandstar knew that the final confrontation must be his alone.

He waited until all the Clan cats had settled themselves around the Highrock, and then began to speak.

"You've all heard by now that Silverstream, Patchpaw, and I went over to Riverclan territory last night." He described the Bonehill and the rotting prey strewn around the clearing, and how Goldenstar had whipped up the hatred of his warriors against half-Clan—cats whose parents came from two different Clans. Sandstar's voice shook as he described the murder of Stonefur, and the cats below him shuddered and flattened themselves against the ground in sympathy and terror.

Ferncloud growled, "Why aren't we attacking Shadowclan right now, then, for revenge?"

"Because it's not as simple as that," Sandstar replied. "Thunderclan

alone can't take on Shadowclan and Riverclan combined, and expect to win."

"We can have a good try," retorted Brightheart, springing to his paws.

"But where would we attack?" asked Sandstar. "There'll be warriors from both Clans in the Riverclan camp and I don't expect Goldenstar has left the Shadowclan camp unguarded."

"I feel just the same as you," he went on. "I don't like what Goldenstar is doing, and I'm afraid of what he might do in the future. I'd like to know what Starclan wants us to do, but so far I've had no word from them. Cinderpelt, have they spoken to you?"

The medicine cat glanced up at him. "No, not yet."

With an angry flick of his ears, Brightheart sat down again, and Cloudtail rubbed against his shoulder to calm him down.

In the brief pause, Sandstar wondered if it was true to say that he had received no message from Starclan. There had been the vision of himself in the stream, wearing the glory of Lionclan. He thought again of Oakstar's prophecy that *Four will become two; lion and tiger will join in battle.*

Suddenly understanding dawned on Sandstar like a ray of sunlight striking through branches. Four *Clans* would become two; did that mean Thunderclan must join with Windclan?

"We're still here, Sandstar!" Ferncloud's voice disturbed his thoughts.

Sandstar started. "Sorry," he meowed. "I've called you here to welcome the three Riverclan cats we rescued. You all know Blackclaw, and Featherpaw and Brookpaw, Silverstream's kits. I think we should offer them a place in Thunderclan until it's safe for them to go home."

Murmuring broke out around the clearing as he made the suggestion. Most cats agreed with him, Sandstar could see, but a few others were looking uncertain.

Longtail was the first to voice her doubts. "That's all very well, Sandstar, and I'm sorry for what they've been through, but if they stay here, what are they going to eat? It's the middle of leaf-bare. We've got our work cut out feeding ourselves."

"I'll hunt for them!" Silverstream sprang up to face the Clan. "I can feed all three of them, and more of the Clan as well."

"We're not helpless, you know," added Blackclaw. "Give us a day or two to get stronger, and we'll hunt for ourselves and you as well."

Mousefur got up and spoke directly to Sandstar. "It's not a question of who's going to hunt. This is a harder leaf-bare than usual, after the fire. We're all hungry, and we'll need all the strength we can get if we're going to have to fight this Tigerclan. I say they should go home."

Fireheart leaped to her paws before Sandstar could speak. "They *can't* go home," she pointed out. "Weren't you listening? They'll be murdered if they do, like Stonefur."

"Do you want it to be known that Thunderclan sent cats to their death?" Sorreltail added.

Mousefur looked down at his paws, anger making his fur bristle.

"It's worth mentioning," Brindleface meowed calmly, "that all these cats are half Thunderclan. They have a right to ask us for shelter."

From his vantage point on top of the Highrock, Sandstar saw a ripple of shock pass through his cats as they turned to look at Blackclaw, standing like a living shadow of their former leader. Remembering the hostility some of them had shown when Blackclaw and Stonefur had shared tongues with the dead Oakstar, Sandstar realized that Brindleface was taking quite a risk in reminding them.

But this time there was no hostility. Even Mousefur and Longtail stayed silent. The story of what had happened beside the Bonehill had sung the sympathy of the Clan over to the Riverclan cats. The warriors relaxed, their shock subsided, and there were a few

murmurs of agreement with what Brindleface had said.

Sandstar looked down at the Riverclan cats where they sat at the base of the rock with Silverstream and Cinderpelt.

"Welcome to Thunderclan," he meowed.

Blackclaw bowed her head in gratitude. "Thank you, Sandstar. We won't forget this."

"It was the right thing to do," Sandstar meowed. "I just hope you'll feel completely better soon."

"They'll be fine, Sandstar,"meowed Cinderpelt. "All they need is good food and a warm place to sleep."

"Yes, there was no bedding in that horrible hole," Featherpaw fretted, his eyes wide and troubled.

"You don't need to think about that anymore," Blackclaw promised with a comforting lick. "Just concentrate on getting strong again. As soon as you're fit, we'll have to get on with your training."

Sandstar remembered that Blackclaw was Featherpaw's mentor. He was wondering about the difficulties of training an apprentice in unfamiliar territory, when Silverstream broke in on his thoughts.

"Stonefur was Brookpaw's mentor, so he'll need another one now. Is it okay if I mentor him myself?"

"Good idea," Sandstar meowed, and was rewarded by the glow of pride and pleasure in Silverstream's eyes as he looked at his son. "We'll hold the ceremony right away." He wasn't sure that it was necessary, given that Brookpaw wasn't truly a member of Thunderclan, but there was something inside him that longed to make contact with Starclan through the old, familiar rituals.

Leaping down from the Highrock he beckoned to Brookpaw with his tail. Brookpaw came to stand in front of him, still shaky on his paws but holding his head high.

"Brookpaw, you have already begun your apprenticeship," Sandstar

began. "Stonefur was a noble mentor, and Thunderclan grieves for her. Now you must continue to learn the skills of a warrior under a new mentor." Turning to Silverstream, he went on: "Silverstream, you will continue Brookpaw's training. You have borne suffering with a warrior's spirit, and I expect you to pass on what you have learned to this apprentice."

Silverstream nodded solemnly, then padded over to his son and touched noses with him. Sandstar caught Sorreltail's eye; the young tom was obviously pleased that his old mentor had a new apprentice.

Sandstar brought the meeting to an end and descended from the Highrock. Glancing around, he spotted Fireheart not far away. "Fireheart, I want to ask you a favor."

The flame-colored she-cat looked up at him. "What is it?"

"It's about Blackclaw. She'll have trouble mentoring Featherpaw properly here. She doesn't know where the training places are, or the dangers, or the best places for prey."

Sandstar hesitated, not sure if what he was about to suggest was a good idea. Not long ago he had chosen Sorreltail to mentor Rowanpaw, and Fireheart had been deeply offended that he had passed her over. She might well take offense again at his new idea.

"Go on," mewed Fireheart.

"I... I wanted to ask you if you'd help Blackclaw with Featherpaw's training. I can't think of any cat who would be better."

Fireheart gave him a long, measured look. "You think you can get around me with a bit of flattery, do you?"

"I don't—"

Fireheart let out a purr of laughter. "Well, maybe you can. Of course I'll help her, you stupid furball. I'll have a word with her now."

Relief washed over Sandstar. "Thank you, Fireheart."

A loud wailing interrupted him. The cats still in the clearing were staring at the entrance from the gorse tunnel. Sandstar could not see what had alarmed them, but he caught the tang of blood on the air, and unfamiliar cat scent.

Thrusting his way through his warriors, Sandstar reached the entrance. Limping out of the tunnel was a cat that was almost wounded beyond recognition. Blood dripped from a long gash in her flank. Her fur was matted with sand and dust, and one eye was closed.

Then Sandstar made out the mottled dark pelt under the dirt and managed to distinguish the scent of Windclan. The newcomer was Mudclaw, barely able to stand from pain and exhaustion.

"Mudclaw!" Sandstar exclaimed. "What happened?"

Mudclaw staggered toward him. "You've got to help us, Sandstar!" she rasped. "Tigerclan is attacking out camp!"

Chapter 19

Sandstar leaped up the slope leading into Windclan territory from Fourtrees. Behind him streamed a patrol of his warriors: Silverstream, Sorreltail, Fireheart, Brightheart, and Ferncloud with his apprentice, Ashpaw. Sandstar had not dared bring more cats to Windclan's aid; he had left Brindleface in charge of the Thunderclan camp with every other warrior on watch, in case Goldenstar planned to attack them as well.

His paws skimmed the springy moorland turf as his legs drove him toward the Windclan camp. A cold wind flattened his fur, carrying the distant scent of Shadowclan. Although Sandstar knew he was still too far away, he imagined he could hear the screeches of battle as Goldenstar's warriors fell on the unsuspecting Windclan.

"We'll be too late," panted Silverstream at his shoulder. "How long did it take Mudclaw to reach us, wounded like that?"

Sandstar did not waste breath in replying. He knew Silverstream was right. This was not the first time that Thunderclan had raced to help Windclan against an alliance of Shadowclan and Riverclan. But that time they had been given more warning and they had managed to drive the attacking warriors away. Now, by the time they reached the Windclan camp, the battle could be over, and yet Sandstar knew that they had to try. The warrior code, his own friendships within Windclan, and the urgency of joining together to resist Tigerclan all forced him to lead his warriors to the rescue as quickly as he could.

As they drew nearer, the scent of Shadowclan was joined by a trace of Riverclan, mingling in a new scent that Sandstar realized was the distinctive odor of Tigerclan. They were near enough that he expected to hear the yowls of fighting cats, and the silence gripped his heart like cold claws. The battle must be over. Sandstar slowed his pace and he and his patrol climbed that last slope toward the camp, his belly filling with dread at the thought of what they might find.

Sandstar slipped quietly up to the ridge where he could look down over the camp. There was a strong scent of Windclan in the air, along with the tang of blood and fear. A single eerie wail broke the silence as Sandstar breasted the rise and saw what Goldenstar had done.

The hollow where the Windclan cats had their camp was lined with gorse bushes. A few yellow flowers still showed on the spiny branches. Beyond, in the center of the camp, Sandstar could see cats huddled together, scarcely moving. As he watched, a pale gray queen raised her head and let out another chilling wail.

"Cloudrunner!" Sandstar exclaimed.

Flicking his tail for his warriors to follow him, he raced down through the bushes and into the camp. Bursting out into the open, he was confronted by the Windclan leader, Tallstar. The black and white she-cat's fur was torn and covered in dust, and her long tail drooped with exhaustion.

"Sandstar!" Her voice was rough with pain. "I knew you would come."

"Not soon enough. I'm sorry."

The Windclan leader shook her head helplessly. "You did your best." She turned toward the cats who crouched on the floor of the clearing, too shocked or injured to move. "You can see what Goldenstar has done."

"Tell us what happened," urged Silverstream.

Tallstar twitched her ears. "You can see. Goldenstar and his warriors crept up on us... we had no warning, and in any case there were too many for us to fight."

Sandstar padded forward, feeling his stomach turn over. None of the Windclan warriors had escaped without wounds. Ashfoot, the Windclan deputy, was lying very still with blood trickling from a gash on his flank; next to him lay Runningbrook, a tom whose pale gray fur was hanging off his shoulder in clumps. Their eyes stared

at nothing, as if they couldn't believe what had happened.

Sandstar could scarcely believe it either. This had been a completely unprovoked attack. There had been no warning at the last Gathering. Goldenstar had gained no extra territory for his Clan. The purpose of this attack had been nothing more than to bring *fear* to the Windclan cats.

"Hey, Sandstar!" A weak voice made Sandstar turn to see his old friend Smokefur. The gray warrior was lying on his side with deep wounds to his throat and shoulder. Barkface, the Windclan medicine cat, was pressing cobwebs to them, but the blood still oozed out sluggishly.

"Smokefur..." Sandstar trailed off, not knowing what to say.

Smokefur's eyes were bright with pain. "It's not as bad as it looks." He grunted. "You should have seen the other cat."

"I wish we'd come in time," Sandstar meowed.

"I wish you had, too. Look over there."

Smokefur turned his head, and Barkface snapped. "Keep still!"

Sandstar followed the injured warrior's gaze. Cloudrunner, the pale gray queen who had been wailing aloud, was crouched over the motionless body of another cat. A small body, with torn brown tabby fur.

"No..." Sandstar's throat closed so he had to choke out the words. "Not Gorsepaw."

"Goldenstar killed her." Smokefur's voice was tight with rage. "He pinned her down in the center of the clearing, with his warriors around him so none of us could get close enough to stop him. He... he said he was going to kill her to show the rest of us what we could expect if we refused to join him."

Sandstar closed his eyes, unable to bear the bloodstained scene in front of him, yet all he could see was an image of the massive leader of Tigerclan, paws holding down the helpless apprentice

while he challenged the Windclan warriors. A shiver ran through him. He thought back to the time that he and Silverstream had traveled to find Windclan and bring them home after Shadowclan had driven them into exile. Sandstar had carried Gorsepaw, then a tiny kit, back across the Thunderpath.

All of that was wasted now, thanks to Goldenstar. Sandstar could not help wondering if Goldenstar had deliberately chosen Gorsepaw because he knew of Sandstar's bond with the young apprentice.

Opening his eyes, Sandstar left Smokefur and padded softly over to Cloudrunner, touching her shoulder with his nose to draw her attention.

She looked up, her beautiful blue eyes dulled with grief. "Sandstar," she whispered. "I didn't ever think you'd saved my daughter for this. What has Starclan done to us?"

Sandstar crouched down beside Cloudrunner, pressing himself against her side to comfort her, and touched his nose to Gorsepaw's fur. "She was growing into a fine warrior," he murmured.

The sound of another cat roused him; he looked up to see Silverstream. His friend bowed his head, too, and touched Gorsepaw's fur, mewing a few words of comfort to Cloudrunner.

"Sandstar, what do you want us to do?" he asked, raising his head again. "We can't just leave them like this."

With a last gentle lick of Cloudrunner's ear, Sandstar stood up and moved away with his friend. "Take two or three cats on a patrol," he ordered. "One or two of Windclan, too, if any of them are fit. They'll know their boundaries better than us. Check to make sure that there are no Tigerclan warriors still lurking around. If you find any, you know what to do—chase them off, or kill them if you have to. And bring back as much fresh-kill as you can. Windclan needs to eat, and they're not capable of hunting for themselves."

"Right," meowed Silverstream. He called Fireheart, Brightheart, and Ferncloud, and checked with Tallstar for permission to patrol in her territory. Tallstar agreed gratefully, and ordered Webfoot, who had

escaped with torn fur and scratches, to go with them and show them the best places for prey.

"We need to talk," the Windclan leader mewed to Sandstar as she watched the patrol leave. "Goldenstar left a message for you."

Sandstar pricked his ears. "A message?"

"He wants both of us to meet him tomorrow at Fourtrees, at sunhigh," Tallstar replied. "He says he's tired of waiting. He wants our decision about whether we'll join Tigerclan or not... and he's shown us what he'll do if we refuse."

She flicked her tail toward the wounded warriors and the limp body of the dead apprentice, all her grief contained in the simple gesture.

Sandstar met her gaze, and the two leaders shared a long look of understanding.

"I'd rather die than join Goldenstar's Clan," Sandstar declared at last.

"So would I," agreed Tallstar. "And I'm glad to hear you say that. Oakstar was right about you all along. Many cats thought you were too young and inexperienced when she made you her deputy, but you're showing your quality now. The forest needs cats like you."

Sandstar bowed his head, humbled by the unexpected praise. "So—we'll meet tomorrow at Fourtrees," he meowed.

Tallstar nodded gravely. "Take my advice, Sandstar, and bring some of your warriors with you. When we refuse to join Goldenstar, I don't imagine he'll let us walk away without a fight."

Sandstar felt chilled to the tip of his tail. He could see that the older cat was right. "Then if we have to, we'll fight together?"

"Together," Tallstar promised. "Our Clans will join together like a lion to fight the tiger who prowls our forest."

Sandstar stared at her in amazement. Tallstar could not know of Oakstar's prophecy, nor of Sandstar's vision by the stream. And yet she had echoed the words of the prophecy. *Four will become two; lion*

and tiger will join in battle. Had Starclan spoken to her as well? Sandstar knew that the Windclan leader would not say—what passed between a Clan leader and the spirits of their warrior ancestors was for no other ears. But this echo reminded Sandstar that they were leaders together, with the power of two mighty Clans behind them.

Gazing steadily at the noble black and white cat, Sandstar meowed, "I swear by Starclan that my Clan will be the friend of yours, to fight this evil side by side."

"I swear it too," Tallstar replied solemnly.

Sandstar raised his head, tasting the air, which still carried a faint trace of the raiding cats. He knew that this vow would run through their blood like cold fire until Goldenstar had been driven from the forest—or until they lost their ninth lives trying.

Chapter 20

The sun had begun to set over the river, turning the water to a moving sheet of flame and sending a comforting warmth through Sandstar's fur. He stood on the top of Sunningrocks, looking out over Riverclan territory.

"I wonder what tomorrow will bring," he murmured.

Beside him, Fireheart shook her head, not replying in words but pressing her warm flank close to him. After their return from the devastated Windclan camp, Sandstar had asked the flame-colored warrior to patrol with him. He had felt the need to get away from the rest of his Clan for a while to prepare himself for the meeting with Goldenstar. Yet he had not wanted to be completely alone, and Fireheart's presence comforted him.

They had skirted Snakerocks and followed the Thunderpath up to the border with Shadowclan to renew the scent markings as far as Fourtrees; finally they returned along the Riverclan border.

There was no sign of Tigerclan intruders. The borders were secure, and yet Sandstar knew that if they had to fight Tigerclan the battle would be about so much more than borders. It would be the climax of his conflicts with Goldenstar, which had lasted almost since he had first set paw in the forest.

Sandstar lingered on the rocks, savoring the comfort of being alone with Fireheart. "Goldenstar is determined to make himself ruler of the whole forest," he meowed. "We must expect a battle."

"And Thunderclan will bear the worst of it," meowed Fireheart. "How many warriors can Windclan offer us after today?"

Her voice was troubled, but Sandstar knew that, with or without Windclan, every cat in Thunderclan would fight beside him bravely.

The fiery light was dying. Sandstar turned to gaze across his

beloved forest. A single star glittered in the violet sky.

Is that you, Oakstar? Sandstar asked silently. *Are you still watching over us?*

Fervently he hoped that his former leader was still protecting the Clan she loved. If they survived the next day's meeting with Goldenstar, and managed to stay free from his quest for absolute power, it would be because Starclan knew that the forest needed four Clans.

Everything was still and silent. There was no breeze to ruffle the cats' fur, no sound of prey scuffling among the rocks. Sandstar felt as if the whole forest were holding its breath, waiting for the coming dawn.

"I love you, Fireheart," he murmured, pushing his muzzle against her side.

Fireheart turned her head to meet his gaze, her green eyes glowing. "I love you, too," she replied. "And I know that you'll bring us through tomorrow, whatever happens."

Sandstar wished he could share her conviction. But he let himself be soothed by her trust in him. 'We need to go and rest," he mewed.

The chill of night was gathering by the time they reached the ravine. Frost already sparkled on the grass and the surface of the rocks. As Sandstar emerged from the gorse tunnel, a pale gray tabby shape loomed out of the darkness.

"I was starting to worry about you," Brindleface meowed. "I thought you might have run into trouble."

"No, we're fine," Sandstar replied. "There isn't even a mouse stirring out there."

"Pity. We could do with a few." Brindleface gave Sandstar a quick report on the patrols he had sent out and the watch he had set on the camp. "You get some sleep," he finished. "It's going to be a tough day tomorrow."

"I will," Sandstar agreed. "Thanks, Brindleface."

The pale gray tabby warrior faded back into the darkness again. "I'm going to check on the sentries," he meowed as he retreated.

"You couldn't have chosen a better deputy," Fireheart commented when he was out of earshot.

"I know. I don't know what I'd do without him."

Fireheart looked at Sandstar, sadness and wisdom in her green eyes. "You might find out tomorrow," she meowed. "Or any of the others. If Goldenstar makes us fight, cats are going to die, Sandstar."

"I know." but he had not truly thought about what that would mean until now. Some of the sleeping cats around him, the friends he loved, the warriors he trusted, would be lost to him. Win or lose, some of the cats Sandstar led out to battle would not come back. And they would die because he had ordered them to fight. A pang of grief shook him, so deep and painful that he almost wailed aloud. "I know," he repeated. "But what can I do?"

"Go on." Fireheart's voice was soft. "You're our leader, Sandstar. You have to do your duty. And you do it brilliantly.:

Humbled, Sandstar found nothing to say, and after a moment Fireheart pressed her muzzle against his. "I'd better get some sleep," she murmured.

"No, wait." Sandstar found he could not face the prospect of that solitary den underneath the Highrock, full of shadows. "I don't want to be alone tonight. Come and share my den with me."

The flame-colored she-cat dipped her head. "All right, if you want me to."

Sandstar gave her ear a quick lick and led the way across the clearing. Even though the curtain of lichen over the entrance to the den had still not grown back after the fire, the den lay in deep shadow.

More by scent than sight Sandstar realized that one of the

apprentices had left fresh-kill for him, and he remembered how hungry he was. The prey was a rabbit; he and Fireheart crouched side by side to share it, swallowing with quick, famished gulps.

"I needed that," Fireheart purred, extending her front paws and arching her back in a long luxurious stretch. Then she yawned. "I could sleep for a moon."

Sandstar arranged his mossy bedding to make a sleeping place for her, and she curled up and closed her eyes. "Good night, Sandstar," she murmured.

Sandstar touched his nose to her fur. "Good night."

Soon her soft, regular breathing told him she was asleep. For all his weariness, Sandstar did not feel ready to curl up beside her. Instead he sat watching while the moon rose and spilled pale light through the entrance to the den, touching Fireheart's fur to silver. She was so beautiful, Sandstar thought, so precious to him. And yet she too might die tomorrow.

This is what it means to be a leader, he realized. He did not know if he could endure the pain of it, even though he knew that when dawn came, he would take up the burden Starclan had laid on him.

Please, Starclan, help me to bear it well, he thought as he settled himself into the moss beside Fireheart. He took comfort from the warmth of her fur as he let sleep claim him at last.

Chapter 21

Sandstar woke to see the den floor washed by the pale light of sunrise. Beside him, Fireheart still slept, the moss stirred by her breathing. Careful not to wake her, Sandstar rose, stretched, and padded out into the chilly morning.

The clearing was deserted, but almost at once Brindleface appeared from the warriors' den.

"I've sent out the dawn patrol," he reported. "Sorreltail, Mousefur, and Silverstream. I told them to do a quick sweep up the Shadowclan border and report back to us."

"Good," mewed Sandstar. "It would be just like Goldenstar to arrange a meeting at Fourtrees and then mount a raise somewhere else. That's why I'm leaving you in charge of the camp, with as many warriors as I can spare."

"Take all the strength you need," Brindleface meowed. "We'll be fine. Young Cloudtail is shaping up to be a really useful fighter ever since she started training with Brightheart. And the elders can still raise a few claws, if they're pushed."

"They'll *be* pushed, before all this is over," Sandstar predicted. "Thanks, Brindleface. I know I can rely on you."

The pale gray tabby warrior nodded and disappeared into the den again. Sandstar watched him go, then padded across the clearing to the fern tunnel that led to Cinderpelt's den.

When he reached the medicine cat's den, he could hear his voice coming from the cleft in the rock.

"Juniper berries, marigold leaves, poppy seeds..."

Looking inside, Sandstar saw the small gray tom checking the heaps

of healing herbs and berries ranged alongside the wall of the den.

"Hi, Cinderpelt," he mewed. "Everything in order?"

The medicine cat turned to him with a grave look in his blue eyes. "As much as it'll ever be."

"You think there will definitely be a battle?" Sandstar asked him. "Has Starclan spoken to you?"

Cinderpelt came to join him at the mouth of the den. "No, not a word," he replied. "But common sense says there'll be a battle, Sandstar. I don't need an omen from Starclan to tell me that."

He was right, Sandstar knew, and yet his words chilled him. With such a momentous meeting ahead, *why* had there been no sign from Starclan? Had their warrior ancestors abandoned them in their time of greatest need? Too late, Sandstar wondered if he should have traveled to Highstones to share tongues with Starclan.

"Do you know why Starclan is silent?" he asked Cinderpelt out loud.

The medicine cat shook his head. "But I do know something," he meowed, as if he had read his thoughts. "Starclan hasn't forgotten us. They decreed long ago that there should be four Clans in the forest, and they won't stand by and let Goldenstar change that forever."

As Sandstar thanked him and turned away to muster his warriors, he wished he shared his faith.

A stiff breeze was blowing as Sandstar led his warriors up the slope to Fourtrees, rippling the grass and carrying the scent of many cats. Each gust brought a sting of rain from the gray clouds that pushed each other across the sky.

At the top of the slope, Sandstar paused, crouching in the shelter of the bushes to look down into the clearing. Almost at once Brightheart appeared at his side.

"Why are we standing about?" he demanded. "Let's get on with it."

"Not until I know what's going on," Sandstar told him. "For all we know, we could be walking into an ambush." Facing his warriors, he raised his voice so that they could all hear him. "You all know why we're here," he began. "Goldenstar wants us to join his Clan, and he won't take no for an answer. I'd like to believe we can get out of this without a fight, but I can't be sure."

As he finished speaking, Brightheart flicked Sandstar on the shoulder with his tail and then pointed to the other side of the hollow. Turning, Sandstar saw Tallstar approaching from Windclan territory, followed by her warriors.

"Good, Windclan is here," he mewed. "Let's go and meet them."

Sandstar led the way along the lip of the hollow until he came face to face with the long-tailed black and white she-cat.

The Windclan leader dipped her head in greeting. "Well met, Sandstar. This is a black day for the forest."

"It is indeed," Sandstar agreed. "But our Clans will stand for what is right by the warrior code, whatever happens."

Sandstar was surprised at how many had come with Tallstar. Remembering the wounded and devastated cats in the Windclan camp the day before, he had expected only a small group to come to Fourtrees. Instead practically every warrior must have been there. They still showed the scars of the raid on their camp, but their eyes were bright and determined. Sandstar recognized his friend Smokefur, a long weal showing red along one flank, and Cloudrunner, her eyes cold with longing to avenge the death of her daughter.

Goldenstar might have a nasty shock, Sandstar reflected, to see how many of Windclan's warriors were still ready to fight against him. Taking a deep breath, he meowed, "Let's go."

Tallstar dipped her head. "Lead on, Sandstar."

Startled at being given such an honor by the older and more experienced leader, Sandstar waved his tail to signal to the two

united Clans—Lionclan, he thought with a rush of pride. This was his destiny.

He stalked down the slope through the bushes, all his senses alert for attack. But he heard nothing except for the rustle of his own warriors following him. The scent of Tigerclan was still some way off.

As Sandstar led his cats into the clearing beneath the great oaks, the bushes on the opposite side parted and Goldenstar stepped out to face him. Blackfoot, Darkstripe, and Leopardstar flanked him like vengeful shadows. The massive tabby's eyes gleamed as he spotted Sandstar, and the young Thunderclan leader realized that this war was personal for him too. Goldenstar wanted nothing more than to sink his claws and teeth into Sandstar's pelt and rip him to pieces.

Instead of making Sandstar afraid, the knowledge exhilarated him. *Let him try!* he thought.

"Greetings, Goldenstar," he meowed coolly. "You came, then. Not still looking for those prisoners you lost from Riverclan territory?"

Goldenstar let out a snarl. "You'll regret that day's work, Sandstar."

"Try and make me," Sandstar retorted.

The Tigerclan leader did not reply, but waited as more of his followers appeared through the bushes. They were a formidable group, Sandstar realized, though some of them bore wounds and claw marks from the raid on Windclan the previous day. His heart began to thump painfully as he realized that the battle he had feared for so long might be unleashed any moment.

Goldenstar took a pace forward, his head raised challengingly. "Have you thought about my offer? I'm giving you the choice. Join with me now and accept my leadership, or be destroyed."

Sandstar exchanged a single glance with Tallstar. There was no need for words. They had already decided what their response must be.

Sandstar spoke for them both. "We reject your offer. The forest was

never meant to be ruled by one Clan, especially one led by a dishonorable murderer."

"But it will be." Goldenstar's voice was soft; he didn't even try to defend himself against Sandstar's accusation. "With you or without you, Sandstar, it will be. By sunset today, the time of four Clans will be over."

"The answer is still no," Sandstar meowed. "Thunderclan will never submit."

"Nor will Windclan," added Tallstar.

"Then your courage is matched only by your stupidity," growled Goldenstar.

He paused, his gaze raking the warriors of Windclan and Thunderclan. Sandstar heard snarls from the Tigerclan warriors behind their leader and forced himself not to flinch away from their glittering eyes and bristling fur. For a few heartbeats not a cat moved, and Sandstar braced himself for Goldenstar's order to attack.

Then he heard a choking sound behind him, and a single word gasped out: "Rowanpaw!"

Squirrelpaw was standing rigid at Sandstar's shoulder, staring into the ranks of their enemies. Following his gaze, Sandstar spotted the young she-cat standing close beside Oakfur, a Shadowclan warrior.

"What is she doing there?" That was Sorreltail, thrusting himself forward to stand at Sandstar's other side. "Goldenstar *did* steal her!"

"Steal her?" There was a purr in Goldenstar's voice. "Not at all. Rowanpaw came to us willingly."

Sandstar didn't know whether to believe him or not. Rowanpaw was looking down at the ground as if she didn't want to meet the eyes of her brother and her former mentor. He had to admit that she didn't look like a prisoner, instead she just looked uncomfortable at being the center of attention.

"Rowanpaw!" Squirrelpaw called. "What are you doing? You're a Thunderclan cat—come back to us!"

Sandstar winced at the pain in the young cat's voice. He remembered the agony of losing Silverstream when his friend chose to leave and join Riverclan.

Rowanpaw said nothing.

"No, Squirrelpaw," Goldenstar meowed. "*You* come to *us*. Your sister made the right choice. Tigerclan will rule over the whole forest, and you can share our power."

Sandstar saw Squirrelpaw's muscles tense. At last, after all the doubts and suspicions Sandstar had felt about him, the young cat was faced with a simple choice. Would he follow his father or stay loyal to his Clan?

"What do you say?" Goldenstar prompted. "Thunderclan is finished. There is nothing there for you."

"Join you?" Squirrelpaw growled. He paused, swallowing as he fought to control his anger. When he spoke again his words rang out clearly so that every cat in the clearing could hear him.

"Join *you*?" he repeated. "After everything you've done? I'd rather die!"

A murmur of approval broke out among the Thunderclan cats.

Goldenstar's yellow eyes smoldered with rage. "Are you sure?" he hissed. "I won't make the offer twice. Join me now, or you *will* die."

"Then at least I'll go to Starclan as a loyal Thunderclan cat." Squirrelpaw retorted, his head high.

Sandstar felt pride thrilling through him from nose to tail-tip. There could be no greater challenge to Goldenstar's power than for his own son to reject him in favor of the Clan his father despised.

"Fool!" Goldenstar spat. "Stay, then, and die with these other fools."

Sandstar braced himself as he waited for his enemy to launch the attack, convinced that battle was upon them. Instead, to his surprise, Blackfoot raised her tail in a signal.

The bushes on the opposite slope rustled, and Sandstar's eyes widened in shock as more cats emerged into the clearing. He had never seen any of them before. They were skinny, their fur ragged, but he sensed strength in their wiry limbs. The stench of crow-food and the Thunderpath rolled off them. These were no forest cats.

The warriors of Thunderclan and Windclan stared in disbelief as more and more of the strangers padded into the clearing. They fanned out into a semicircle around Tigerclan, row after row of them, more cats than Sandstar could remember seeing all together in the forest, even at a Gathering.

"Well?" Goldenstar demanded silkily. "Are you still sure that you want to stand and fight?"

Chapter 22

Dismay kept Sandstar's paws rooted to the ground as he watched the newcomers approach. He noticed that some of them were wearing collars.

"*Collars*?" Ashpaw spat behind him, echoing his thoughts. The apprentice's voice was sharp wih disgust. "Look at them—they're *kittypets*! We won't have any trouble beating them."

"Keep quiet," her mentor, Ferncloud, warned quietly, "until we have the full measure of our enemy, we don't know anything about these cats yet."

Sandstar remained silent until all the strange cats had moved into the clearing and gathered around Tigerclan. A huge black and white she-cat stepped out of their ranks and went to stand beside Goldenstar. Sandstar presumed this was the leader of the newcomers. She was almost as big as Goldenstar himself, and she was muscular and battle-scarred. Even though they wore collars, Sandstar knew these cats were far from being pampered kittypets.

Behind the black and white warrior appeared a much smaller black cat, who stalked light-footed through the grass to stand on Goldenstar's other side. Sandstar could not imagine who she was; she looked more like a medicine cat than a warrior.

Sandstar could feel every hair in his pet tingling, and the air tasted thick, as if a storm were about to break. "So, Goldenstar," he meowed, forcing his voice to remain steady. "Do you want to tell us who your new friends are?"

"This is Bloodclan," Goldenstar announced. "They come from Twolegplace. I have brought them to the forest to persuade you foolish cats to join with me. I knew you wouldn't have the sense to agree on your own."

A hiss of outrage rippled through Thunderclan and Windclan.

Sandstar heard Blossomfall whisper, "Remember those rogues we scented the day I was made a warrior? I bet they came from Bloodclan."

He could well be right, Sandstar thought. A patrol of these rogues from Twolegplace, checking out the forest to see what Goldenstar had to offer them. And what exactly had he offered? To share the forest in return for their help in battle?

"You see, Sandstar?" Goldenstar's voice was exultant. "I am even more powerful than Starclan, for I have changed the Clans in the forest from four to two. Tigerclan and Bloodclan will rule together."

Sandstar stared at his enemy in alarm. There was no possibility of reasoning with Goldenstar now. His hunger for power had twisted him so that in his mind his own huge figure dominated everything, blotting out even the light of Starclan.

"No, Goldenstar," he answered quietly. "If you want to fight, let us fight. Starclan will show who is more powerful."

"You mouse-brained fool!" Goldenstar spat. "I was prepared to come here and talk with you today. Just remember that it was you who drove us to this. And when your Clanmates are dying around you, they will blame you with their last breath." He swung around to face the mass of cats ranged behind him. "Bloodclan, attack!"

Not a cat moved.

Goldenstar's yellow eyes widened and he screeched, "Attack, I order you!"

Still none of the warriors moved, except for the small black cat who took a pace forward. She glanced toward Sandstar. "I am Scourge, the leader of Bloodclan," she meowed, her voice cold and quiet. "Goldenstar, my warriors are not yours to command. They will attack when *I* tell them, and not before."

The look Goldenstar gave her was incredulous and glittered with all the hatred he had ever shown to Sandstar, as if he couldn't believe that this scrap of a cat was defying him. Sandstar seized his

opportunity. He paced forward until he stood right in front of the two leaders. Behind him, he heard Silverstream hiss, "Sandstar, be careful!"

But this was no time for being careful. The very future of the forest was at stake, balanced on the breadth of a hair between Goldenstar's bloodthirsty quest for power, and the whims of the unknown Bloodclan.

Now Sandstar could see that the collar Scourge wore around her neck was studded with teeth—the teeth of dogs, and... *cats'* teeth, too. Great Starclan! Did they kill their own kind and where the teeth as trophies?

Others of the cats were wearing the same grisly ornaments. Sandstar's belly clenched and his mind reeled with a vision of blood flowing down the sides of the hollow, washing around the cats' paws in a sticky, reeking tide. His terror was not just for himself and his own Clan, but for every cat in the forest, friends and enemies alike.

Would blood truly rule the forest, as Oakstar had prophesied? Had she meant that Blood*clan* would rule? Sandstar shot a scorching glance at Goldenstar, wanting to express all the hatred he felt for the cat who had brought them to this.

But Sandstar knew he had to hold on to his self-control if he was to make any impression on the Bloodclan cats. Dipping his head toward their leader, he meowed clearly, so all the cats could hear him, "Greetings, Scourge. I am Sandstar, leader of Thunderclan. I wish I could say you are welcome in the forest. But you would not believe me if I did, and i have no wish to lie to you. Unlike your supposed ally here, I am a cat of honor." He flicked his tail toward Goldenstar, trying to put all the contempt he felt into the single gesture. "If you've believed any promises he made you, you're mistaken."

"Goldenstar told me he had enemies in the forest." There was all the cold of leaf-bare in the black cat's voice. When Sandstar looked into her eyes it was like gazing into the deep places of the night, unrelieved by the smallest gleam of light from Starclan. "Why

should I believe you instead of him?"

Sandstar took a breath. This was the chance he had wanted all along, the chance he had missed at the last Gathering, when thunder and lightning had interrupted the meeting. At last he could stand in front of all the Clans of the forest and bring Goldenstar's dreadful history into the open. But now it was not just a matter of tarnishing Goldenstar's reputation, but of saving the whole forest from destruction.

"Cats of all Clans," Sandstar began, "and especially cats of Bloodclan, you have no need to believe or disbelieve me. Goldenstar's crimes speak for themselves. When he was still a warrior of Thunderclan, he murdered our deputy, Redtail, hoping to be made deputy himself. First Frostfur was chosen as deputy, but when the noble warrior died in a fight with Shadowclan, Goldenstar achieved his ambition at last."

He paused; a grim silence gripped the whole clearing, broken only by a contemptuous rumble from Goldenstar. "Mew away, little kittypet. It won't change anything."

Sandstar ignored him. "Being deputy wasn't enough," he went on. "Goldenstar wanted to be leader of the Clan. he set a trap for Oakstar by the Thunderpath, but my own apprentice strayed into it instead. That's how Cinderpelt came by his crippled leg."

A shocked murmur swept through the clearing. Except for Bloodclan, they all knew Cinderpelt, and he was popular even with cats of other Clans.

"Then Goldenstar conspired with Brokentail, the former leader of Shadowclan, who was Thunderclan's prisoner," Sandstar told the listening cats. "He brought a pack of rogues into Thunderclan camp, and tried to murder Oakstar with his own claws. I stopped him, and when Thunderclan had beaten off the attack we drove him into exile. As a rogue, he slaughtered yet another of our warriors, Dappletail. Then before we knew what he was up to, he had made himself leader of Shadowclan."

Sandstar paused and looked around him. He was not sure how

Bloodclan and their leader, Scourge, were taking all this, but he could see that he had the horrified attention of every other cat in the clearing. He steadied himself, wanting to be sure they heard the last, most dreadful part of his story.

"But Goldenstar still wanted revenge on Thunderclan. Three moons ago, a pack of dogs got loose in the forest. Goldenstar caught prey for them, then laid a trail of dead rabbits between the dogs' lair and the Thunderclan camp to lead them to us. He murdered one of our queens, Whitestorm, and left her near the camp to give the dogs a taste for cat blood. If we hadn't found out in time to escape, the whole of Thunderclan would have been torn to pieces."

"Good riddance," Goldenstar growled.

"As it was," Sandstar forced himself to go on, "our leader, Oakstar, died the bravest death of any cat, saving me and all her Clan from the pack."

He expected yowls of outrage, but only silence greeted him as his story came to an end. The eyes of every cat were fixed on him, stunned with shock.

Sandstar glanced at Leopardstar, still standing with Blackfoot and Darkstripe a little way behind Goldenstar. The Riverclan leader look horrified. For a few heartbeats Sandstar hoped that he might immediately break his agreement with Goldenstar and withdrew his Clan from his leadership, but he remained silent.

"This is Goldenstar's history," Sandstar meowed urgently, turning back to Scourge. "It all shows one thing—that he'll do anything for power. If he promised you a share of the forest, don't believe him. He won't give up one pawprint, not to you or any cat."

Scourge's eyes narrowed; Sandstar could see that she was thinking carefully about what she had heard, and hope flared inside him like a tiny flame. "Goldenstar told me what he was planning to do with the dogs when he visited me two moons ago." The black cat turned her head so that her gaze rested on the leader of Shadowclan. "He did not tell me that his plan failed."

"None of that matters now," Goldenstar broke in roughly. "We have an agreement with you, Scourge. Fight beside me now, and you'll have all I offered you."

"My Clan and I fight when I choose," Scourge meowed. To Sandstar she added, "I will think about what you have said. There will be no battle today."

Goldenstar's fur bristled with rage and his tail lashed from side to side. His muscles bunched as he dropped into a crouch. "Traitor!" he screeched, and leaped at Scourge with claws extended.

Watching with horror, Sandstar expected to see the smaller cat torn apart. He knew from bitter experience the strength in Goldenstar's muscles. But Scourge whipped to one side, avoiding Goldenstar as he landed. When the massive tabby turned to face her, Scourge lashed out with her front paws. The pale leaf-bare sun glinted unnaturally on the tips of each talon. Sandstar felt his blood run cold. Scourge's claws were reinforced with long, sharpened dogs' teeth.

One blow to his shoulder unbalanced Goldenstar. He fell on his side, exposing his belly, and Scourge's vicious claws sank into his throat. Blood welled out as the smaller cat ripped him down to the tail with a single slash.

A desperate scream of fury erupted from Goldenstar, then broke off with a ghastly choking sound. His body convulsed, limbs jerking and tail flailing. For a heartbeat a stillness settled over him, and Sandstar knew he was falling into the trance of a leader who loses a life. To wake after a little while restored to strength and with the rest of his lives intact.

But not even Starclan could heal this terrible wound. Scourge stood back and watched coldly as Goldenstar's body convulsed again. The dark red blood kept flowing, spreading across the ground in a ceaseless tide. Goldenstar let out another shriek; Sandstar wanted to cover his ears so he didn't have to listen anymore, but he was frozen to the spot.

Again the massive tabby's body grew still for a heartbeat, but again

the wound was too terrible to yield to the healing trance. Another spasm seized Goldenstar's body. His caws tore up clumps of grass in his agony, while his screeches turned from fury to terror.

He's dying nine times, Sandstar realized. *Oh, Starclan, no...*

It was a death he would not have wished on any cat, not even Goldenstar, and he thought it would never be over.

When they saw what was happening to the leader they had believed was invincible, horrified yowling came from the warriors of Tigerclan. Sandstar realized that they were all breaking rank; several cats pushed roughly past him in their mad haste to flee from the clearing. From somewhere behind him he heard Tallstar call out to her own warriors, "Wait! Hold the line!"

Sandstar knew he did not have to give his own warriors the same order. They would stand with him to the end.

Goldenstar was panting now, his fight of life exhausting him. Sandstar caught a glimpse of his yellow eyes, glazed with pain and fear and hatred. Then his body gave one last jerk and lay still.

Goldenstar was dead.

Frozen in disbelief, Sandstar stared down at the lifeless body. His oldest enemy, the most dangerous cat in the forest, the cat he had expected to fight to the death—gone, just like that.

Sandstar was left facing Scourge. The small black cat looked unmoved. Now Sandstar knew not to underestimate her due to her size. He knew he had never faced a cat more dangerous than this, who in a single blow could destroy a leader with nine lives.

Behind Scourge, the cats of Bloodclan moved forward as if they were about to attack, and Sandstar shot a glance at his own warriors to make sure they were ready. They stood in line with the warriors of Windclan, and Sandstar braced himself to leap forward with them, but when he looked back at the enemy, Scourge raised one blood-soaked paw.

The cats behind her stopped.

"You see what happens to cats who defy Bloodclan," the black cat warned calmly. "Your friend here"—she gave a contemptuous flick with her tail toward Goldenstar's motionless body—"thought he could control us. He was wrong."

"We don't want to control you," Sandstar rasped. "All we want is to lead our lives in peace. We're sorry that Goldenstar brought you here with lies. Please feel free to hunt before you go home."

"Go home?" Scourge widened her eyes in scornful disbelief. 'We're not going anywhere, forest fool. In the town where we come from, there are many, many cats, and live prey is scarce. Here in the forest we won't need to depend on Twoleg rubbish for our food."

Her gaze slid past Sandstar to where Thunderclan and Windclan stood ready for battle. "We are taking over this territory now," she went on. "I shall rule the forest as well as the town. But I understand that you may need some time to reflect on this. You have three days to leave—or meet my Clan in battle. I shall wait for your decision at dawn on the fourth day."

Chapter 23

Sandstar stared, speechless with shock, as Scourge turned away and disappeared through the lines of her own warriors. Silently the cats of Bloodclan fell in behind her and vanished into the bushes with scarcely a rustle. Sandstar tracked their departure through the movement of the branches up the side of the hollow, and then they were gone.

Sandstar looked down at the body of Goldenstar. The huge tabby's legs were splayed and his teeth bared in a last snarl of defiance at death. The yellow eyes that had smoldered with savage ambition were blank and sightless.

Faced with the death of his enemy, Sandstar knew he should feel triumphant. He had known for a long time now that the only hope for peace in the forest was the death of Goldenstar. But Sandstar had always expected that he would be the cat that struck his enemy down, risking his own life in combat with the massive warrior. Instead, now that Goldenstar lay at his paws, staining them with his blood, he found himself struggling with the strangest feeling of all—grief. Goldenstar had received from Starclan all the strength, skill, and intelligence to make himself truly great, a legend among cats. But he had misused his gifts, murdered and lied and plotted revenge, until his ambition brought him to this terrible end. And nothing had been solved. The fate of every Clan still hung in the balance, and the tide of blood still flowed.

We need your strength, Goldenstar, Sandstar whispered. *Just as we need every cat who can fight, to drive Bloodclan out of the forest.*

He became aware that another cat was standing beside him, and he turned his head to see Silverstream. The rest of the Thunderclan cats were still drawn up in their battle lines at the far side of the clearing, with Tallstar and Windclan warriors beside them.

"Sandstar?" Silverstream's blue eyes were huge with fear. "Are you

okay?"

Sandstar shook himself. "I will be. Don't worry, Silverstream. Come on—I need to talk to Tallstar."

As they turned away, Silverstream glanced down at the dead Shadowclan leader and a shudder passed through him. "I never want to see anything like that again," he meowed hoarsely.

"If we don't get rid of Scourge, you probably will," Sandstar replied.

He paced slowly back toward the Windclan leader, using the time it took to cross the clearing to think. When he stood in front of Tallstar, he saw his own shock reflected in the eyes of the older cat.

"I can't believe what I've just seen," the Windclan leader mewed. "Nine lives gone—just like that."

Sandstar nodded. "No cat would blame you if you took your Clan and left the forest to find another place to live." He did not doubt Tallstar's courage, but felt unable to assume that she would stay to fight such a terrible enemy.

Tallstar stiffened and her neck fur bristled. "Windclan was driven from the forest once," she hissed. "Never again. Our territory is *ours*, and we'll fight for it. Is Thunderclan with us?"

Even before Sandstar replied he heard a murmuring from his own cats, defiance and determination mingled together. "We'll fight," he promised. "And we'll be proud to stand side by side with Windclan."

The two leaders looked into each other's eyes for a few heartbeats. Sandstar could see that Tallstar shared the fear neither of them had spoken, that their resolve to fight the invading cats could mean the destruction of both their Clans.

"We'll go now to prepare ourselves," Tallstar meowed at last. "And we'll meet you here again in three days, at dawn."

"At dawn," Sandstar echoed. "And may Starclan be with us all."

He watched the Windclan cats retreat up the slope toward their

territory before he turned to his own warriors. They looked subdued, eyes wide with apprehension, yet Sandstar knew that none of them would flinch from the coming battle. They had followed him to Fourtrees expecting to fight, and even though their enemies were more terrible than any cat could have imagined, they would still defy them to keep the forest that they loved.

"I'm proud of you all," Sandstar mewed quietly. "If any cats can drive out Bloodclan, you can."

Fireheart padded over to him and pressed her muzzle against his shoulder. "With you to lead us, we will do anything," she promised.

For a moment Sandstar felt too overwhelmed to speak. Far from lifting his spirits, his warriors' expectations weighed on him heavily. "Let's get back to camp," he managed to meow at last. "We've a lot to do. Silverstream, Brightheart, scout ahead. I wouldn't put it past Scourge to lay an ambush for us."

The two warriors bounded away in the direction of the Thunderclan camp. A few moments later Sandstar led the rest of his cats after them, putting Ferncloud at the rear to keep watch. As they headed swiftly through the forest Sandstar thought that he could feel Scourge's cold, malignant eyes following their pawsteps. Once before, when the dog pack was loose, Sandstar had felt like prey in the forest, and now his enemy had a face all the more terrible for being one of his own kind.

But if the Bloodclan leader was watching them she gave no sign of it, and the Thunderclan warriors reached the ravine unchallenged.

Sandstar noticed that Squirrelpaw had begun to lag behind, his tail trailing on the ground. "What's wrong?" he asked gently.

Squirrelpaw raised his eyes to his mentor's, and Sandstar was shocked by the depths of sick horror in his gaze.

"I thought I hated my father," he mewed quietly. "I didn't want to join his Clan. But I didn't want him to die like *that*."

"I know." Sandstar pressed his muzzle against the young cat's side.

"But it's over now, and you're free of him."

Squirrelpaw turned his head away. "I don't think I'll ever be free of him," he murmured. "Even now that he's dead, no cat will forget that I'm his son. And what about Rowanpaw?" His voice choked. "How *could* she choose to follow him?"

"I don't know." Sandstar understood how much pain Rowanpaw's betrayal must have caused her brother. "But if we come through this, I promise that we'll find a way of talking to her."

"Does that mean you will let her come back to Thunderclan?"

"I can't be sure of anything," Sandstar admitted. "We don't even know if she *wants* to come back. But I'll give her a fair hearing, and do the best I can for her."

"Thank you, Sandstar." Squirrelpaw's voice was tired and defeated. "I suppose that's more than she deserves." He dipped his head to his mentor and padded on toward the gorse tunnel.

Sandstar gazed down from the Highrock as the cats of Thunderclan emerged from their dens and gathered below him. He could see from their horror struck expressions that the news of Bloodclan's threat and Goldenstar's terrible death had already spread throughout the camp. He knew that it was his duty to give them hope and courage, but he did not know if he could, when he had so little for himself.

The sun was going down, and the rock cats a long shadow across the sandy floor of the clearing. The scarlet rays of the dying sun made it too easy for Sandstar to imagine that the camp was already washed in blood. He wondered if it wasn't a sign from Starclan, that all his friends, all his warriors, would be destroyed. After all, the warriors ancestors had shown no sign of anger when Scourge had ripped Goldenstar's nine lives out of him and let all his life's blood run into the scared ground at Fourtrees.

No, Sandstar told himself. To think like that was to despair and do nothing. He had to go on believing that Bloodclan could be defeated.

Clearing his throat, he began to speak. "Cats of Thunderclan, you have heard of the threat that faces us. Bloodclan has come from Twolegplace and laid claim to the forest. They want us to run away and let them take over without a fight. But three days from now, we will stand together with Windclan and make Bloodclan fight for every mouse length of the forest."

In the clearing below, Brightheart leaped to his paws and yowled agreement. Several cats echoed him, but Sandstar could see that some glanced doubtfully at one another, as if they were not sure they had a chance of surviving against Bloodclan and their fearsome leader.

"What about Riverclan and Shadowclan?" asked Brindleface. "Will they fight? And if they do, which side will they be on?"

"That's a good question," Sandstar replied. "And I don't know the answer. The Tigerclan warriors ran away when Goldenstar died."

"Then we need to know where they went," Brindleface meowed.

"I could slip over into Riverclan territory to see," suggested Blackclaw, getting up from where she sat at the base of the rock. "I know all the best places to hide."

"No." Sandstar ordered. "You're in more danger over there than any cat. We don't know if Tigerclan is still persecuting half-Clan cats, and I don't want to lose you. Thunderclan needs you."

For a moment Blackclaw looked as if she would have liked to argue, but she dipped her head and sat down again as Brindleface meowed, "We can find out most of what we need from border patrols."

Sandstar nodded. "That's your job, Brindleface. I want extra patrols along the Shadowclan and Riverclan borders. Their main task is to find out what the other Clans are doing, but they can keep their eyes open for Bloodclan as well. If Scourge decides to attack before the three days are up, I don't want us to be caught napping."

Brindleface flicked his tail in agreement. "Consider it done."

Sandstar could see that his deputy's calm efficiency had encouraged the rest of the Clan, and he went on quickly before their fears could return. "Next, every cat in the Clan must be prepared to fight."

"Even the kits?" That was Brackenkit, springing eagerly to her paws. "Can we be in the battle? Can we be apprentices?"

In spite of the danger they were in, Sandstar suppressed a purr of amusement. "No, you're too young to be apprentices," he told Brackenkit gently. "And I can't take you into battle. But if Bloodclan wins, they'll come here, and you'll need to be able to defend yourselves. Fireheart, will you be responsible for training the kits?"

"I will, Sandstar." Fireheart's green eyes flashed with approval at Brackenkit and her littermates, Sootkit and Rainkit, who had scrambled up to stand beside their sister. "They'll be able to give Bloodclan a nasty surprise by the time I've finished with them."

"What about Cloudtail?" Brightheart called. "Her fighting moves are coming along well."

"I want to fight in the battle," Cloudtail mewed determinedly. "Can I, Sandstar?"

Sandstar hesitated. Cloudtail was stronger now, and she had been training hard with Brightheart. "I'll think about it," he promised. "Are you ready for an assessment?"

Cloudtail nodded. "Anytime, Sandstar."

"We'll fight with you, too," Blackclaw put in from where she sat near the base of the rock. Featherpaw and Brookpaw, sitting beside her, straightened up and looked determined. "We're all strong enough, thanks to you."

"Good. As for the rest of you"—Sandstar's gaze swept the clearing —"warriors, apprentices, and elders, you have three days to prepare. Silverstream, will you supervise a training program?"

His friend's eyes lit up and his ears pricked. "No problem, Sandstar."

"Get a couple of the others to help you... and rotate the training

sessions so Brindleface has enough cats for his patrols, and for hunting." Glancing around, he spotted the medicine cat sitting near the fern tunnel that led to his den. "Cinderpelt, are you ready to look after the wounded?"

Privately, Sandstar knew there was no need to ask; he had never known Cinderpelt *not* to be ready, but he knew it would reassure the other cats to hear him say so out loud.

The look Cinderpelt gave him showed that he understood. "Everything's prepared," he replied. "But there'll be a lot to do once the fighting starts. If you could let me have an apprentice to help, that would be great."

"Of course." As Sandstar wondered which apprentice to choose, his gaze rested on Dustpaw, and he remembered her gentleness and sensitivity to other cats' injuries. "You can have Dustpaw," he announced, and saw Ferncloud flash him a relieved look. "Dustpaw, if that's okay with you?"

The brown tabby she-cat dipped her head in assent. For a moment Sandstar wondered if he had forgotten anything, but he couldn't think what else they could do to prepare for what lay ahead.

Gazing down at his Clan, their shapes beginning to melt into the twilight, he took a deep breath. "Now eat well, and get a good sleep tonight," he ordered. "Tomorrow we'll begin—and in three days we'll be ready to show Scourge and her Clan that our forest will never be theirs for the taking."

Chapter 24

When Sandstar emerged from his den the following morning, the camp was already full of activity. Mousefur was leaving at the head of a patrol. Fireheart was rounding up Willowpelt's three kits, who bounced around her in wild excitement as she herded them toward the gorse tunnel on their way to the training hollow. Blackclaw and the two Riverclan apprentices followed them. Sorreltail passed them at the entrance to the camp, a piece of fresh-kill in his jaws.

Sandstar spotted Brindleface with Squirrelpaw and Ashpaw beside the thorn wall that surrounded the camp, and padded across to join them. The pale gray tabby warrior came to meet him.

"I'm getting these two to inspect the defenses and patch any gaps," he meowed. "If Bloodclan get this far..." He stopped, his green eyes worried.

"Good idea." Sandstar suppressed a shiver at the thought of Bloodclan breaking into the camp. He turned sharply at the sight of movement in the gorse tunnel, and flashed a glance of astonishment at Brindleface as Patchpaw appeared, followed by Raven. The black loner had never been to the Thunderclan camp before.

Leaving his deputy to finish instructing the apprentices, Sandstar padded toward them. Patchpaw hurried forward confidently, but Raven lagged behind, glancing warily around, as if she wasn't sure of a welcome.

"We have to talk to you." Patchpaw blurted out. "Last night we met Smokefur on the border of his territory and he told us about Scourge and Bloodclan." The black and white fur on her shoulders bristled. "We want to help, but more important, Raven has some information for you."

Sandstar dipped his head in greeting. "It's good to see you both," he meowed. "And we're grateful for any help we can get. Perhaps you'd

better come to my den."

Raven relaxed at Sandstar's friendly greeting, and the two loners followed Sandstar to the hollow beneath the Highrock. Early morning sunshine slanted through the entrance and into the peaceful den. Sandstar could almost forget the threat from Scourge and her bloodthirsty followers. But the serious expressions of his visions reminded him all too clearly of the shadow over the future of the forest.

"What is it?" he prompted, once the two loners were settled.

Patchpaw was gazing around her with an almost awestruck look—Sandstar guessed she was remembering Oakstar, and maybe wondering at how the apprentice who had trained with her had come to take the former leader's place. Raven, however, looked uneasy, crouching with her paws tucked under he as she begin to speak.

"I was born in Twolegplace," she began quietly. "I know too much about Scourge and her warriors. I... I suppose you could say I was once a member of Bloodclan."

Sandstar's interest quickened. "Go on."

"The first thing I remember is playing with my littermates on a patch of waste ground," Raven explained. "Our father taught us how to hunt and find food among Twoleg rubbish. Later on he showed us how to defend ourselves."

"Your father mentored you?" Sandstar asked, surprised. "All of you?"

Raven nodded. "Bloodclan doesn't have a proper system of mentors and apprentices. It's not a Clan at all in the way you forest cats understand it. Most cats listen to Scourge because she's the strongest and the most vicious, and Bone is a kind of deputy, insofar as she carries out Scourge's dirty work."

"Bone?" Sandstar asked. "Is that a big black and white cat? She was there at Fourtrees."

"That sounds like her, yes." The loner's voice was filled with disgust.

"She's almost as bad as Scourge. Any cats who don't do as they're told are chased off, if they're lucky, or more likely killed."

Sandstar stared at her. "But what about caring for kits and elders?"

Raven shrugged. "A cat's mate will probably hunt for them while they're nursing their kits," she mewed. "Even Scourge realizes that if there are no kits, sooner or later there's no Clan. But elders, or cats who are sick or injured—well, they're left to fend for themselves. It's kill or be killed, hunt or starve. There's no room for weakness."

Sandstar felt every hair on his pelt bristle at the thought of a Clan that did not care for cats who were in need, where cats who had given good service were allowed to die if they could not care for themselves.

"Then why does any cat follow Scourge?" he burst out.

"Some of them enjoy killing." Raven's tone was cold and her eyes were bleak, staring at something Sandstar could no see. "And others are too scared to do anything else. You can't lead your own life in Twolegplace if you're not a kittypet with a Twoleg nest to go to. Either you're with Scourge or against her, and cats who are against her don't last long."

Patchpaw shifted closer to her friend and pressed her muzzle comfortingly against her flank. "That's why Raven left," she meowed. "Tell Sandstar about it, Raven."

"There's nothing much to tell." Raven flinched, shrinking from some dark memory. "I couldn't bear what Scourge was doing, so one night I slipped away. I was terrified that Scourge or her warriors would catch me, but I reached the edge of Twolegplace and crossed the Thunderpath. I scented cats in the forest, but at the time I thought they would be just like Scourge and her lot, so I kept away from them. And finally I came to the farm, where it seemed I could live unchallenged. The Twolegs leave me in peace. They have no use for their mice."

She fell silent while Sandstar thought rapidly. Raven's words confirmed what he had already known, that Scourge was a violent

and dangerous enemy. "Scourge *must* have weaknesses," he meowed to Raven. "There must be some way of defeating her."

Raven met his eyes and leaned toward Sandstar. "Her one great strength is her one great weakness," she replied. "Scourge and her warriors don't believe in Starclan."

Sandstar wondered what she meant. Brightheart had no belief in Starclan, but he was still a loyal Thunderclan cat. What was Raven trying to tell him?

"Bloodclan has no medicine cat," Raven went on. "I've already told you, they don't care for the sick, and if they don't believe in Starclan, there aren't any signs that could be interpreted."

"Then... they don't follow the warrior code?" That had been a stupid question, Sandstar realized as soon as the words were out. Everything Raven had told him, everything he had seen for himself of the way Scourge and her cats behaved, confirmed that. "And you're telling me that's a weakness? All it means is they can do as they like, with no code of honor to stop them."

"That's true," Raven admitted. "But think, Sandstar. Without the warrior code you might be just as bloodthirsty as Scourge. You might even be better at fighting her. But without the belief in Starclan—what are you then?"

She met Sandstar's eyes steadily. Sandstar's head reeled. After what Raven had told him he dreaded Bloodclan even more, and yet somewhere in his mind there was a faint spark of hope, as if Starclan were trying to tell him something that he couldn't understand—or not yet.

"Thank you, Raven," he meowed. "I'll think about what you've told me. And I won't forget that you tried to help us."

"That's not all we'll do." Patchpaw rose to her paws. "Smokefur told us that you're meeting Scourge in battle in three days—two days now. When you do, we'll both be with you."

Sandstar stared at her, mouth open. "But you're loners," he began.

"It's not your quarrel..."

"Come on, Sandstar," Raven mewed. "If Scourge and her gang take over the forest, how long do you think we would last? It wouldn't take them a quarter moon to find our barn and all the plump mice. We'd have the choice of getting out or being killed."

"We'd rather fight for our friends," Patchpaw added quietly.

"Thank you." Sandstar felt humbled by the depth of loyalty the two loners were showing him. "All the Clans will honor you."

Raven snorted. "I don't know about that. All I want is a quiet life—but I won't get it until Bloodclan is dealt with."

"None of us will." Sandstar's ears twitched in agreement. "There's no hope for any of us while Scourge is in the forest."

Sandstar had said goodbye to Patchpaw and Raven and was heading for the sandy hollow to check up on the training program when he spotted longtail and Lionheart leaping down the ravine. Sandstar paused and waited for them.

"Any news?" he asked.

Longtail nodded. "We've been along the Shadowclan border as far as Fourtrees," she reported. "There's a reek of Bloodclan coming from Shadowclan territory. You get the foul stink in your nose even from across the Thunderpath."

"They must be hiding out over there," Lionheart added.

"That makes sense," Sandstar mewed thoughtfully. "But where has Shadowclan gone?"

"I was coming to that." Longtail's eyes were wide with excitement. "We picked up their scent at Fourtrees—the scent of many cats traveling in the same direction. I believe they crossed into Riverclan territory."

"So they went to their allies in Riverclan," Sandstar mused. He wondered what sort of a welcome they would get. Would

Leopardstar try to regain his old authority now that Goldenstar was dead?

Sandstar shrugged. He had problems enough of his own without worrying about Leopardstar's. "Thanks, Longtail," he meowed. "We needed to know that. Go and get something to eat."

With a nod of acknowledgment, Longtail led the way into the gorse tunnel with Lionheart close behind her. Sandstar stood watching them go, and when the tip of Lionheart's tail had vanished he went on to watch his cats training.

Silverstream was standing on a jutting slab of rock overlooking the apprentices. He pricked his ears in greeting as Sandstar came to join him.

"How is it going?"

"Couldn't be better," Silverstream replied. "If Scourge could see us, she'd bolt straight back to Twolegplace with her tail between her legs."

The silver tabby warrior was wearing a look of stubborn determination that Sandstar remembered from the days of his forbidden relationship with Graystripe. Briefly he wished that he could tell Silverstream about seeing Graystripe in his dream at the Moonstone, but it wouldn't help his friend's grief. The beautiful she-cat was still dead, and Sandstar hoped it would be a long time before Silverstream joined her in the ranks of Starclan.

"At any rate," Silverstream went on. "We're the best fighting force this forest has ever seen." His eyes widened as his gaze fell on a mock fight between Squirrelpaw and Blossomfall. "Hang on a minute. I need to give Squirrelpaw a tip about his clawing action."

He leaped down from the rock and bounded across the hollow, leaving Sandstar to look around. Closest to him, Smallear and Speckletail were stalking around each other, waiting for a chance to spring. Fireheart was instructing Willowpelt's three kits on the other side of the hollow. Sandstar padded down to watch and he heard her meowing, "Okay, I'm a Bloodclan warrior and I've just broken

into your camp. What are you going to—"

The last word became a screech as Brackenkit pounced and bit down hard on her tail. Fireheart spun around, one forepaw raised with claws sheathed, but before she could bat Brackenkit away, Sootkit and Rainkit jumped on her from behind. The flame-colored she-cat vanished under a writhing mass of kits.

By the time Sandstar reached her, she was struggling free of them, her green eyes alight with laughter. "Well done!" she meowed. 'If I really was from Bloodclan, I'd be running scared by now." Turning to Sandstar, she added, "Hi, there. Did you see these three? In a few moons they'll make great warriors!"

"I'm sure they will," Sandstar mewed. "You're doing very well," he praised them. "And no cat could teach you better than Fireheart."

"I want Fireheart to be my mentor when I'm an apprentice," Brackenkit meowed. "Can she, Sandstar?"

"No, *I* want her!" Sootkit protested.

Rainkit added, "No, *I* do!"

Shaking her head, Fireheart let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Sandstar will decide who your mentors will be," she told the kits. "Now let him see you practice those defensive moves."

Sandstar watched while the kits scuffled together, pretending to attack and defend themselves. Even though they were excited, they managed to remember what Fireheart had taught them, dodging expertly or dashing in to give their mock attacker a quick nip.

"They're good," Fireheart commented quietly. "Especially that little Sootkit." With a sidelong glance at Sandstar, she added, "If you asked me to mentor her, I wouldn't say no."

"Just between you and me, she's yours when the time comes," Sandstar promised, blinking gently at her.

Even though he and Fireheart, the kits, and all the Clan were standing on the brink of disaster, Sandstar still could not suppress a

burst of pride and hope. Pressing his muzzle against Fireheart's side, he murmured, "We'll win the battle. I have to believe that."

Fireheart did not reply in words, but the look she gave him said everything.

Leaving her to go on with her lesson, Sandstar crossed the hollow to the far side, where Brightheart and Cloudtail were training with Ashpaw and Ferncloud. Cloudtail had just bowled Ferncloud over; he got up, spitting out sand, and meowed, "I never saw that move coming! Show me again."

Cloudtail dropped into a crouch, but relaxed a moment later when she saw Sandstar.

Brightheart padded over to him, his tail held high. "Did you see that?" he asked proudly. "Cloudtail fights really well now."

"Carry on," Sandstar prompted her. "This looks interesting."

Cloudtail flashed him a nervous look from her one good eye, and then turned back to concentrate. Ferncloud was trying to creep up on her blind side, but she weaved back and forth, keeping him in view the whole time. When he sprang, she slipped under his outstretched paws and hit his back legs to roll him onto the ground again.

"Well done, Cloudtail," Sandstar called.

He twitched his ears to draw Brightheart a little way away. "I hoped you'd be here," he meowed quietly. "I'm going to see Olive, and I thought you might want to come too."

Brightheart's ears pricked. "Are you going to warn her?"

"Yes. With Bloodclan on the prowl, she should know of the danger. I know she doesn't often go into the forest, but just so..."

"I'll be right with you," Brightheart meowed, padding back for a word with Cloudtail.

A moment later the two cats were heading for Tallpines, Sandstar

calling goodbye to Silverstream as they left the hollow. The pale sunlight of leaf-bare fell on the ash that still remained from the fire. The few plants that had returned were dry and shriveled, and there was neither sound nor scent of prey. This leaf-bare would have been hard enough, Sandstar reflected, without the extra trouble from Bloodclan.

When they reached the Twoleg nest where Olive lived, Sandstar was relieved to see the white she-cat sitting on the garden fence. She let out a trill of welcome as he raced across the open ground at the edge of the forest and leaped up onto the fence beside her. Brightheart followed him in a couple of heartbeats.

"Sandstorm!" Olive exclaimed, pressing her muzzle against his flank. "And Brightheart! It's so good to see you both. Are you well?"

"Yes, we're fine," Sandstar replied.

"He's Clan leader now," Brightheart put in. "You have to call him Sand*star*."

"Clan leader? That's wonderful!" Olive let out a deep, delighted purr. Sandstar knew she was proud of him even though she had no real understanding of what that meant—either the grief of Oakstar's death or the heavy weight of responsibility that went with leadership. "I'm so pleased for you." Olive went on. "But you're both very thin," she added doubtfully, drawing back to inspect her brother and her son. "Are you eating properly?"

It was hard to answer that question. Sandstar and all the Clan cats were used to feeling hungry in this hard leaf-bare, but Olive had no way of knowing how scarce prey was, not when her Twolegs fed her the same kittypet food every day.

"We're doing well enough," Brightheart repeated impatiently, before Sandstar could reply. "But we came to tell you to stay out of the forest. There are evil cats around."

Sandstar flashed an irritated look at his hotheaded kin; he would have tried to find a gentler way of warning Olive. "Cats from Twolegplace have come into the forest," he explained, pressing

himself comfortingly against Olive's side. "They're fierce creatures, but they should leave you alone."

"I've seen them slinking through the trees," Olive admitted, her voice hushed. "And I've heard stories about them. Apparently they even kill dogs and other cats."

The tales were true, Sandstar reflected, remembering the teeth studding Scourge's collar. And before very long, there would be more death to Scourge's name.

"All good storytellers exaggerate," he told Olive, hoping he sounded convincing. "You don't need to worry, but it would be best if you stayed in your own garden."

Olive held his gaze steadily, and Sandstar realized that for once she wasn't deceived by his lighthearted tone. "I'll do that," she promised. "And I'll warn the other house cats."

"Good." Brightheart meowed. "And don't worry about a thing. We'll soon get rid of Bloodclan."

"Bloodclan!" Olive echoed, and a shiver passed through her. "Sandstar, you're in danger, aren't you?"

Sandstar nodded, suddenly unwilling to treat her like a soft kittypet who couldn't cope with the truth. "Yes," he replied. "Bloodclan has given us three days to get out of the forest. We don't intend to leave, so that means we have to fight them."

Olive went on giving him that long, thoughtful look. The tip of her tail swept around and touched a scar on his flank, and old would from a battle so long ago that he had forgotten which one it was. Sandstar had a sudden vision of how he must appear to her: gaunt and ragged in spite of his lean muscles, his battle-marked pelt a constant reminder of the harshness of his forest life.

"I know you'll do your best," she mewed quietly. "The Clan couldn't have a better leader."

"I hope you're right," Sandstar meowed. "This is the worst threat to the Clan that we've ever had to face."

"And you'll come through it; I know you will." Olive rasped her tongue over his ear and pressed close against him. Sandstar smelled her fear-scent, but she stayed calm, and her gentle features were unusually serious. "Come back safely, Sandstar," she whispered. "Please."

Chapter 25

After they said good bye to Olive, Brightheart went off to hunt, leaving Sandstar to return to the camp alone. Twilight was gathering by the time he reached the ravine, and he scented Brindleface before he spotted the pale gray tabby warrior ahead of him. Sandstar caught up to him just before he reached the gorse tunnel; he had a vole clamped in his jaws, and set it down when he saw Sandstar.

"I was hoping for a word with you," he began, without even waiting for a greeting. "And it's best out here, where no cat will overhear us."

Sandstar's heart lurched. "What's the matter? Has something gone wrong?"

"You mean apart from Scourge?" the older warrior meowed wryly. He settled himself on a flat rock and beckoned with his tail for Sandstar to join him. "No, nothing's wrong. The patrols and the training are going well... but I keep asking myself, have we really thought about what we're doing?"

Sandstar stared at him. "What do you mean?"

The Thunderclan deputy took a deep, painful breath. "Scourge and her Clan outnumber us by many, even with Windclan fighting on our side. I know your warriors will fight to the last drop of blood to save the forest, but perhaps the price will be too high."

"Are you saying we should give in?" Sandstar's voice sharpened, he had never expected to hear advice like this from his deputy. If Brindleface's courage hadn't been beyond question, he would have said it was the speech of a coward. "Leave the forest?"

"I don't know." Brindleface sounded tired, and Sandstar was suddenly reminded of his age. "Things are changing, no cat can deny that, and perhaps it's time to move on. There must be territory

beyond Highstones. We could find another place—"

"Never!" Sandstar interrupted. "The forest is *ours*."

"You're young." Brindleface looked solemnly at him. "You would see it that way. But cats are going to die, Sandstar."

"I know." All day Sandstar had kept busy, encouraging his warriors —and himself—with thoughts of a victory over Scourge. Now Brindleface was forcing him to face the fact that even if they won, it would be at a terrible cost. Thunderclan might drive the invading cats from the forest and still be left with few survivors, as weakened as if they had been defeated.

"We *must* go on," he meowed. "We can't turn tail and run like mice. You're right, Brindleface, I know you are, but what other choice have we? It *can't* be the will of Starclan for us to leave the forest."

Brindleface nodded. "I thought you would say that. Well, I've told you what I think. That's what a deputy's for."

"I'm grateful for it, Brindleface."

The pale gray tabby warrior rose to his paws, turned toward his vole, and then glanced back at Sandstar. "I've never had the kind of ambition that drove Goldenstar—or you," he meowed. "I've never wanted to be leader. But I'm particularly glad I'm not leader now. No sane cat would envy you the decisions you have to make."

Sandstar blinked, not knowing what to say.

"All I hope for," Brindleface went on, "is that I'll fight my hardest when the time comes."

A shadow of uncertainty crossed his face, and Sandstar realized that many cats would have joined the elders by Brindleface's age. It would be natural for him to fear that his fighting strength might fail.

"I know you will," he agreed. "There's no nobler warrior in the whole forest."

Brindleface held his gaze for a long moment, saying nothing. Then he picked up his vole and padded into the camp.

Sandstar stayed on the rock. Brindleface's words had disturbed him, and he was suddenly reluctant to go back into camp and settle in his shadowy den under the Highrock. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep.

After a few moments listening to the soft sounds of the gathering night, Sandstar rose and headed back up the ravine. Faint red streaks showed where the sun had gone down, but overhead the sky was dark, and a few early warriors of Starclan looked down at him.

Sandstar slipped silently through the undergrowth, and it was some time before he realized that his paws were taking him toward Sunningrocks. By the time he reached the edge of the trees it was completely dark. The rounded shapes of the rocks were outlined against the sky like the backs of crouching animals, with a shimmer of frost on the surface. Beyond them he could hear the soft bubble of the river over the stones, and much closer a faint scuffling noise alerted him to the presence of prey.

Sandstar's mouth watered as he identified the scent of a mouse. Barely letting his paws touch the ground, he crept up on it and sprang. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until his jaws closed on it, and he finished it in a few ravenous gulps.

Feeling better, Sandstar sprang up to the top of the rock and found a place where he could sit and look down at the river. The dark water glittered with starlight. A breeze ruffled the surface, buffeting his fur and stirring the leafless forest around him.

Sandstar turned his gaze upward to Silverpelt. The warriors of Starclan were watching—but they seemed cold and far away on this frosty night. Did they really care about what happened in the forest? Or had Oakstar been right all along, when she raged against them in her private war? For a moment Sandstar caught a glimpse of his former leader's terrible sense of isolation. He could not truly share it, for unlike Oakstar he had never lost faith in the warriors of his own Clan, but he was beginning to understand how she had come to doubt Starclan.

So many cats had already died in Goldenstar's fierce struggle for power, and Starclan had not saved them. Sandstar wondered if he was being foolish to think that his warrior ancestors would help him now.

But without Starclan, how *could* his Clan survive? Lifting his head, he yowled to the glory of Silverpelt. "Show me what I should do! Show me that you're with us!"

No answer came from the white fire above him.

Painfully aware of how small and weak he was compared with the sky-spread Starclan, Sandstar found a hollow in the rock that was sheltered from the chill breeze. He did not expect to sleep, but he was exhausted, and after a while his eyes closed.

He dreamed that he was seated in Fourtrees, his senses lulled by the warm air and sweet scents of greenleaf. The warriors of Starclan surrounded him on all four slopes, as hey had done on his visit to the Moonstone when he received the nine lives of a Clan leader. He saw Spottedleaf and Raggedpelt there, and all the warriors who were lost to Thunderclan, as well as others, newly added to the shining ranks: Stonefur and the young apprentice Gorsepaw.

In his dream Sandstar sprang to his paws and confronted them. For the time he did not feel in awe of his warrior ancestors. It seemed as if they had abandoned him, and the whole forest, to their terrifying fate. "You rule the forest!" hissed Sandstar, letting all his anger at their betrayal spill out. "You sent the storm on the night of the Gathering, so that I couldn't tell the Clans what Goldenstar had done. You allowed him to bring Scourge into the forest! Why are you doing this to me? Do you *want* us to be destroyed?"

A familiar figure stepped forward; Oakstar's dark reddish brown fur shimmered in the starshine, and her eyes were amber fire. "Sandstar, you don't understand," she meowed. "Starclan does *not* rule the forest."

Sandstar gaped at her, with nothing to say. Was everything wrong, then, that he had learned since he came into the forest as a kittypet, so long ago?

"Starclan cares for every cat in the forest," Oakstar continued, "from the blind, helpless kits to the oldest elder lying in the sun. We watch over them. We send omens and dreams to the medicine cats. But the storm was no doing of ours. Scourge and Goldenstar wade through blood to power because that is their nature. We watch," the former leader repeated, "but we do not interfere. If we did, would you truly be free? Sandstar, you and every cat have the choice of whether or not to follow the warrior code. You are not the playthings of Starclan."

"But—" Sandstar tried to interrupt.

Oakstar ignored him. "And now we're watching you. You are the cat we have chosen, Sandstar. You are the sand storm who will save the Clan. No warrior of Starclan brought you here. You came of your own accord because you have a warrior's spirit and the heart of a true Clan cat. Your faith in Starclan will give you the strength you need."

As she spoke, a sense of peace crept over Sandstar. He felt as though Oakstar's strength and the strength of all the warriors of Starclan were flowing into him. Whatever happened when his Clan met Bloodclan in battle, Sandstar knew Starclan had not abandoned him.

Oakstar rested her muzzle on his head just as she had done on the day he was made a warrior. At her touch, the pale fire of the assembled warriors began to fade, and Sandstar sank into the warm darkness of deep sleep. When he opened his eyes, it was to see the first light of dawn straining the sky.

Sandstar rose and stretched, the memory of his dream filling his paws with energy. It was his duty as leader to save his Clan. And with the strength of Starclan to help him, he would find a way to do it.

Chapter 26

Sandstar wondered if the rest of his Clan had noticed his absence, and if they were worrying about him. He knew that he should go back to the camp, but for a short time, he stayed where he was on top of the rock, watching the dawn light spread above the forest.

The territory on the far side of the river was still and silent. Sandstar tried to imagine how Leopardstar was coping. He guessed that the Shadowclan warriors who had fled into his territory would be unwelcome guests, with no prey to spare through the harsh moons of leaf-bare.

Then he sat bolt upright, fur bristling and ears pricked. Something had just occurred to him, and he couldn't think why he hadn't thought of it before. Maybe Thunderclan wasn't as outnumbered as he feared. Across the river were the warriors of two Clans, and with Goldenstar dead none of them had any reason to support Bloodclan.

"Mouse-brain!" he murmured aloud. There was a chance that all four forest Clans could join together to drive out the lethal cats that threatened every pawstep of their lives. Four would not become two —four would become *one*, but not in the way that Goldenstar had intended.

As the first glittering rays of the sun appeared above the horizon, Sandstar leaped down from the rock and raced down stream toward the stepping stones.

"Sandstar! Sandstar!" The yowl brought him up short just as he came in sight of the stones. He turned to see a Thunderclan patrol emerge from the trees behind him. Silverstream was in the lead, followed by Fireheart, Brightheart, and Squirrelpaw.

"Where have you been?" Fireheart mewed crossly as she picked her way toward him. "We've been worried sick."

"Sorry." Sandstar gave her ear an apologetic lick. "I needed to think

a few things out, that's all."

"Brindleface said you would be okay," Silverstream meowed. "And Cinderpelt didn't seem worried. I got the feeling he knew more than he was telling."

"Well, I'm here now," Sandstar mewed briskly. "And I'm glad I've met you. I'm going over into Riverclan territory, and it'll look better if I take some warriors with me."

"Riverclan?" Brightheart looked amazed. "What do you want with them?"

"I'm going to ask them to fight with us against Scourge tomorrow."

The young warrior stared. "Are you out of your mind? Leopardstar will rip your fur off!"

"I don't think he will. Now that Goldenstar's dead, he won't want Bloodclan in the forest any more than we do."

Brightheart shrugged, and Silverstream was looking uncertain too, but Fireheart's green eyes glowed with delight.

"I knew you would think of a way to defeat Bloodclan," she purred. "Let's go."

Sandstar turned to lead the way to the stepping stones, but paused as Squirrelpaw padded up to him.

"Sandstar, can we talk to Rowanpaw if she's there?" his apprentice asked hopefully. His voice quavered. "There might not be another chance."

Sandstar hesitated. "Yes, if you see her," he meowed. "Get her side of the story. Then we'll decide what to do."

"Thanks, Sandstar!" Squirrelpaw's eyes shone with relief.

Sandstar slipped down the bank to the stepping stones with his warriors behind him. As he led the way across he kept alert for movement on the opposite side of the river, but he saw nothing.

There had not even been a Riverclan patrol, though by now the sun was well above the horizon.

Reaching the far bank, Sandstar turned upriver toward the Riverclan camp. Before he reached it he came to the stream that led to the clearing of the Bonehill. A shudder ran through him as he remembered the last time he had been here. The reek of crow-food was fainter now, but the scent of many cats came to him on the breeze. Sandstar recognized the mingled scent of Tigerclan, once so ominous but now almost familiar compared with the stench of Bloodclan.

"I think they must be in the clearing by the Bonehill," he mewed over his shoulder. "Some of them, at least. We'll go and see—Silverstream, keep a lookout."

Silverstream fell back as Sandstar followed the stream, creeping quietly through the reeds until he came to the edge of the clearing. Peering out, he saw that the Bonehill was already beginning to crumble so that it looked like nothing more than a heap of rubbish. The stream was no longer choked with rotting prey, and there was a small heap of fresh-kill, as if cats had begun to establish a new camp.

Several warriors were huddled in the clearing, with ungroomed fur and dull, staring eyes. Sandstar was surprised to see cats from both Riverclan and Shadowclan. He had expected to find only Shadowclan warriors setting up a camp here while Riverclan occupied their old camp on the island upriver.

Leopardstar was crouched at the foot of the Bonehill. He was gazing straight in front of him, and Sandstar thought he must have seen him, but he gave no sign. The Shadowclan deputy, Blackfoot, lay close by. As his initial surprise ebbed, Sandstar felt relieved that he would be able to deal straight away with Leopardstar, who was obviously trying to rule both Clans.

He glanced back at Fireheart. "What's wrong with them?" he murmured. He would almost have believed that the warriors were sick, but there was no taint of sickness in the air.

Fireheart shook her head helplessly, and Sandstar turned back to the clearing. He had come here looking for a fighting force, but these cats appeared to be half-dead. Still, there was no sense in going back. Signaling with his tail for his own cats to follow, he stepped into the clearing.

No cat challenged him, although one or two of the warriors raised their heads and gave him an incurious stare. With a glance at Sandstar, Squirrelpaw slipped away to look for Rowanpaw.

Leopardstar struggled to his paws. "Sandstar." His voice rasped, as if he had not used it in many days. "What do you want?"

"To talk to you," Sandstar replied. "Leopardstar, what's going on here? What's the matter with you all? Why aren't you in your old camp?"

Leopardstar held his gaze for a long moment. "I am the sole leader of Tigerclan now," he meowed at last, a spark of pride returning to his dull eyes.

"The old Riverclan camp is too small to hold both Clans. We let the queens and kits and elders stay there, with some warriors to guard them." He let out a spurt of mocking laughter. "But what's the point? Bloodclan will slaughter us all."

"You mustn't think like that," he urged the Riverclan leader. "If we all stand together, we can drive out Bloodclan."

A wild light shone in Leopardstar's eyes. "You mouse-brained fool!" he spat. "Drive out Bloodclan? How do you think you're going to do that? Goldenstar was the greatest warrior this forest has ever seen, and you saw what Scourge did to him."

"I know," Sandstar replied steadily, hiding the shiver of sheer dread that ran through him. "But Goldenstar faced Scourge alone. We can join together as one to fight her so that afterward we can be four Clans again, according to the warrior code."

A sneering look crossed Leopardstar's face and he made no reply.

"What will you do, then?" Sandstar asked. "Leave the forest?"

Leopardstar hesitated, tossing his head from side to side as if the effort of talking to Sandstar irritated him. "I sent a scouting party to look for places to stay beyond Highstones," he admitted. "But we have young kits, and two of our elders are ill. Not every cat can go, and the ones that stay will die."

"They don't have to die," Sandstar promised him desperately. "Thunderclan and Windclan are going to fight. Stand with us."

He expected further mockery, but Leopardstar was looking at him more intently now. Nearby, Blackfoot scrambled to her paws and padded over to stand beside him. As she faced the Thunderclan cats Sandstar heard a low snarl from Silverstream, and saw his friend begin to flex his claws. He gave the silver tabby warrior a warning flick with his tail; he loathed Blackfoot just as much as Silverstream did, but for now they would have to be allies in order to face an even greater enemy.

"Are you mouse-brained?" the Shadowclan deputy growled. "You can't seriously be thinking of joining these fools? They're not strong enough to tackle Bloodclan. They'll get us all torn apart."

Leopardstar gave her a cold look, and Sandstar realized with a sudden burst of hope that he didn't like Blackfoot anymore than he did. Stonefur, who had died under the white warrior's claws, had been his trusted deputy.

"I am leader here, Blackfoot," he pointed out. "I make the decisions. And I'm not ready to give up yet—not if there's a chance of driving out Bloodclan. All right," he meowed, facing Sandstar again. "What's your plan?"

Sandstar wished he had some clever trick to offer, some way of driving out Bloodclan that wouldn't risk the lives of every cat in the forest. But there was no trick; the path to victory, if there were one, would be hard and painful.

"At dawn tomorrow," he replied. "Thunderclan and Windclan will meet Bloodclan at Fourtrees. If Shadowclan and Riverclan join us, we'll be twice as strong."

"And will you lead us?" asked Leopardstar. Reluctantly he added, "I haven't the strength now to take my cats into battle."

Sandstar blinked in surprise. He had expected Leopardstar to demand authority over the other Clans. He wasn't at all sure that he himself was strong enough to take on the leadership in his place, but he could see that he had no choice.

"If that is your wish, then yes, I will," he replied.

"Lead us?" The voice, harsh with mockery, came from behind Sandstar. "A kittypet? Are you out of your mind, Leopardstar?"

Sandstar turned, knowing what he would see. Darkstripe was thrusting her way through the little group of her former Clanmates.

Sandstar stared at her. In Thunderclan, Darkstripe had always been sleek; now her black-striped coat was dull, as if she had stopped caring for it. She looked gaunt, and the tip of her tail twitched nervously. Only the cold hostility in her eyes was familiar, and the insolence with which she looked Sandstar up and down as she came to a stop in front of the leaders.

"Darkstripe." Sandstar acknowledged her with a nod. Though he could never truly pity the dark warrior, he felt a pang to see how haunted she looked, her eyes empty, as if she were already being punished for betraying her birth Clan.

Leopardstar stepped forward. "Darkstripe, this isn't your decision," he meowed.

"We should kill you or drive you out," Darkstripe snarled at Sandstar. "You turned Scourge against Goldenstar. It's your fault he died."

"My fault?" Sandstar gasped in astonishment. The dark tabby's eyes blazed with hatred, and Sandstar knew that in her own way Darkstripe was grieving for the dead leader. Now that Goldenstar was dead, Darkstripe was utterly alone. "No, Darkstripe. It was Goldenstar's own fault. If he hadn't brought Bloodclan into the forest, none of this would have happened."

"And how did it happen?" Silverstream broke in. "That's what I'd like to know. What was Goldenstar thinking of? Didn't he see what he was letting loose in the forest."

"He thought it was for the best." Leopardstar tried to defend Goldenstar, though his words sounded hollow. "He believed the forest cats would be safer if they all joined together under his leadership, and he thought Bloodclan would convince you he was right."

A snort of contempt came from Silverstream, but Leopardstar ignored it. Instead, he flicked his tail and another cat came up—a skinny gray she-cat with a ragged ear. Sandstar recognized her as Pebble, one of the rogue cats Goldenstar had taken into Shadowclan.

"Pebble, tell Sandstar what happened." Leopardstar ordered.

The Shadowclan warrior looked thin and tired as she met Sandstar's gaze. "I belonged to Bloodclan once," she confessed. "I left many moons ago, but Goldenstar knew about my past. He asked me to take him into Twolegplace because he needed more cats to make sure Shadowclan controlled the forest." She glanced down at her paws, her ears twitching uncomfortably. "I... I tried to tell Goldenstar that Scourge was dangerous, but neither of us imagined what he could do. Goldenstar offered Scourge a share of the forest if she would bring her cats to help him fight. He thought that once he'd make all the other Clans join Tigerclan he could get rid of Bloodclan."

"But he was wrong," Sandstar murmured, feeling again that strange grief he had felt when he saw his oldest enemy lying dead at his paws.

"We couldn't believe it when he died." Pebble's eyes were stunned, as if she were sharing Sandstar's memory. "We thought nothing could ever defeat Goldenstar. When Bloodclan attacked our camp after Goldenstar died, we were too shocked to fight, though not all of us left. Some cats thought it would be safer to join Scourge. Jaggedtooth, for one." Pebble's voice grew bitter. "It would be worth fighting Bloodclan to get my claws into that traitor's fur."

"Then will you do it?" Sandstar glanced around and realized that all the cats in the clearing had drawn closer and were silently listening. Only Blackfoot and Darkstripe stood aloof, at the edge of the crowd. "Stand with us and Windclan tomorrow?"

The cats remained silent, waiting for Leopardstar to speak.

"I don't know," he mewed. "Maybe the battle is already lost. I need time to think."

"There's not much time left," Fireheart pointed out.

Sandstar gathered his own warriors together with a sweep of his tail and beckoned them over to the side of the clearing. "Think now, Leopardstar." he meowed. "We'll wait."

The Riverclan leader flashed him a defiant glance, as if he were going to insist that he would take as much time as he needed, but he said nothing, only drawing two or three of the Riverclan warriors closer to him and speaking to them in a low, urgent voice. Anger burning in her eyes, Blackfoot thrust her way forward to join them. The rest of the cats stayed in their frozen, wretched silence, and Sandstar couldn't help wondering what kind of fighting force they would make.

"How mouse-brained can they be?" growled Brightheart. "What's to discuss? Leopardstar says they can't leave safely—what else can they do but fight?"

"Be quiet, Brightheart," Sandstar ordered.

"Sandstar." Squirrelpaw's voice interrupted him. Sandstar turned to see his apprentice standing a tail-length away with Rowanpaw close beside him. "Rowanpaw wants to talk to you."

The young she-cat returned Sandstar's gaze steadily, reminding him irresistibly of her formidable mother, Tigerclaw.

"Well, Rowanpaw?" he prompted.

"Squirrelpaw says I should tell you why I left Thunderclan," Rowanpaw meowed without preamble. "But you already know,

don't you? I wanted to be judged for what I was, not for what my father did. I needed to feel I belonged."

"No cat thought you didn't belong," Sandstar protested.

Rowanpaw faced him with a glint in her eyes. "Sandstar, I don't believe that," she meowed. "And neither do you."

Sandstar felt his fur flush hot with guilt. "I made a mistake," he admitted. "I looked at both of you, and all I could see was your father. Other cats did, too. But I didn't want you to leave."

"Other cats did," Rowanpaw meowed quietly.

"She could still come back into the Clan, couldn't she?" Squirrelpaw pleaded.

"Hang on a minute," Rowanpaw interrupted sharply. "I'm not asking you if I can come back. All I want is to be a loyal cat in my new Clan." Her eyes were shining. "I want to be the best warrior I can be," she went on. "And I can't be that in Thunderclan."

Sandstar could hardly bear to see all the courage and loyalty that they were losing. "I'm sorry you left Thunderclan," he meowed, "and I wish you well, Rowanpaw. I really believe that if all four Clans fight tomorrow we can win back the forest. Shadowclan will survive, and be a Clan you can be proud of—a Clan that will be proud of you."

Rowanpaw gave him a short nod. "Thank you."

Squirrelpaw looked distraught, but Sandstar knew there was nothing more to say. The sound of his name distracted him, and he turned to see that Leopardstar was padding toward him across the clearing.

"I have made my decision," he told him.

Sandstar felt his heart begin to pound. Everything rested on Leopardstar's choice. Without the support of Riverclan and Shadowclan—even with their warriors in such a pitiful state—there was no hope of driving Bloodclan out of the forest. The few

heartbeats before Leopardstar reached him seemed to stretch out to a moon.

"Riverclan will fight against Bloodclan tomorrow," she announced.

"And so will Shadowclan," Blackfoot added, walking up behind him. Her eyes flashed at Leopardstar as she silently asserted her authority.

Even though Sandstar was relieved that the leaders had chosen to fight, he noticed some doubtful looks among the other cats. Darkstripe was the only one to speak out loud.

"You're all mad," she spat. "Joining a kittypet? Well, I'm not going to follow him, whatever any cat says."

"You'll obey orders," snapped Leopardstar.

"Make me," Darkstripe retorted. "You're not my leader."

For a few heartbeats Leopardstar looked at her with cold eyes. Then he shrugged. "Thank Starclan I'm not. You're about as much use as a dead fox. Very well, Darkstripe, do as you like."

The dark warrior hesitated, looking from Leopardstar to Blackfoot and back again, and then around at the rest of the clearing. The warriors were still murmuring among themselves, and none of them paid any attention to Darkstripe.

She glanced back at Leopardstar as if she were about to speak, but the Riverclan leader had already turned away. Darkstripe swung around with a vicious snarl at Sandstar. "You fools—you'll all be ripped apart tomorrow."

She stalked away in dead silence. The cats parted to let her go and watched her until she disappeared into the reeds. Sandstar pondered where the solitary warrior could possibly go now.

Leopardstar stepped forward. "I swear by Starclan that we will meet you at dawn tomorrow at Fourtrees. We will fight with you and Windclan against Bloodclan." More briskly he added, "Shadepelt, will you send out hunting patrols? We'll need all our strength for

tomorrow."

A dark gray Riverclan tom flicked his tail and began moving through the cats, choosing warriors for the patrols.

Leopardstar looked at the Bonehill with deep sadness in his eyes, and a shiver ran through his mottled pelt. "We must pull this down," he murmured. "It belongs to a darker time."

He dug his claws into the heap of prey bones. Slowly and hesitantly, as if they still thought that Goldenstar might appear and accuse them of treachery, his warriors joined him. Bone by bone, the pile was scattered across the clearing. Blackfoot and a few of the Shadowclan warriors stood watching a little way off. The deputy's face was shadowed, and it was impossible to guess what she was thinking.

Sandstar drew his own followers away. He had succeeded in what he set out to do, and he could not help admiring Leopardstar's courage, but instead of satisfaction he felt a dark surge of foreboding as he cast one last glance at the two Clans in the clearing.

What if I've condemned them all to death?

Chapter 27

It was the time before dawn when the moon had set, but the sun had yet to streak the horizon with milky fingers of light. The night was still and cold, black like frozen water.

Sandstar padded out of his den. The clearing was empty, but he could hear the faint sounds of warriors waking up. Frost glittered on the ground, while above his head Silverpelt flowed like a river across the sky.

Pausing to drink in the night air filled with the scents of so many familiar cats, Sandstar felt every hair on his pelt stand up. This could be the last morning for any Clan. He felt as if everything were spinning out of his control, but when he looked for strength in the knowledge that Starclan controlled his fate, he found only uncertainty.

Sandstar sighed and shook himself before walking over to the fern tunnel that led to Cinderpelt's den. The medicine cat was dragging herbs and berries into the clearing, where Dustpaw was making them into bundles ready to carry.

"Is everything ready?" Sandstar asked.

"I think so." Pain filled Cinderpelt's blue eyes, as if he were already seeing the wounded cats who would soon need his help. "I'll need more cats to carry all this up to Fourtrees. Dustpaw and I can't manage on our own."

"You can have all the apprentices," Sandstar meowed. "Dustpaw, will you go and tell them?"

The young she-cat dipped her head and hurried off.

"Once we get there, the other apprentices will be needed to fight," Sandstar went on. "But Dustpaw can stay with you. Find somewhere well out of the way. I think there's a sheltered hollow on the other

side of the stream—"

Cinderpelt bristled. "Sandstar, you don't mean that? What use will I be if I'm not where the fighting is?"

"But the cats need you," Sandstar insisted. "If you're injured, what happens to the rest of us?"

"Dustpaw and I can take care of ourselves. We're not helpless kits, you know." Cinderpelt's tart response reminded Sandstar of his mentor, Raggedpelt.

Sighing, he padded up to the medicine cat and touched noses with him. "Have it your own way," he meowed. "I know I can't say anything to change your mind. But please... be careful."

Cinderpelt let out a soft purr. "Don't worry, Sandstar. We'll be fine."

"Has Starclan spoken to you about the battle?" Sandstar forced himself to ask.

"No, I've seen no omens at all." The medicine cat raised his eyes to Silverpelt, where it was fading in the predawn sky. "It's not like Starclan to be silent when something so important is going to happen."

"I... I had a dream from them, Cinderpelt," Sandstar told him hesitantly, "but I'm not sure I understand it, and there isn't time to tell you all of it now. I just hope it means something good for us."

There was curiosity in Cinderpelt's blue eyes as he spoke of his dream at Sunningrocks, but he did not question him.

Sandstar returned through the fern tunnel and crossed the clearing to the elders' den. On the way he passed Sorreltail on watch, and waved a greeting with his tail.

When he reached the fallen tree, charred by the fire that had swept through the camp last greenleaf, Sandstar found all the elders still sleeping except for Smallear, who sat with her tail curled around her paws.

The she-cat rose to her paws as Sandstar came toward her. "Is it time?"

"Yes," Sandstar replied. "We'll be leaving soon... but you're not coming with us, Smallear."

"What?" The fur on Smallear's shoulders stiffened with annoyance. "Why not? We may be elders, but we're not useless. Do you really think we're going to sit back and—"

"Smallear, listen. This is important. If you're honest, you know that Speckletail and Halftail would barely make it to Fourtrees, never mind fight when they got there. And Runningwind's getting very frail. I can't lead them into battle against Scourge."

"And what about me?"

"I know you're a fighter, Smallear." Sandstar had thought carefully about what he was going to say, but with the elder glaring at him he felt like a raw apprentice again. "That's why I need you here. There'll be the other three elders here, and Willowpelt's kits. They've learned some defensive moves but they're not ready for battle. I'm putting you in charge of the camp while the rest of us are away."

"But I—Oh." Smallear broke off as she understood what Sandstar was asking her to do. Slowly the fur on her shoulders lay flat again. "I see. All right, Sandstar. You can count on me."

"Thank you." Sandstar blinked his gratitude at her. "If the battle goes badly, we'll try to fall back here and reinforce you, but we might not make it. If Bloodclan comes here, you'll be all that's left of Thunderclan." His eyes met Smallear's. "You'll need to get the kits and elders away. Try to cross the river, then head for Raven's farm."

"Right." Smallear gave him a brisk nod. "I'll do the best I can." Turning, she looked over to where Cloudtail slept in the shelter of the tree trunk. "What about her?"

"Cloudtail is as strong as any warrior now," Sandstar meowed, his heart lifting. "She's coming with us." He padded over and nudged

the young she-cat with one paw. "Wake up, Cloudtail. It's time to go."

Cloudtail blinked up at him with her good eye, then rose and stretched. "Okay, Sandstar. I'm ready."

She was heading out into the clearing when Sandstar called her back. "Cloudtail, if we come through this, you'll be sleeping in the warriors' den from now on."

Cloudtail's ears pricked and she seemed to stand taller. "Thank you, Sandstar!" she meowed, and dashed off, all her drowsiness vanished.

Dipping his head in farewell to Smallear, Sandstar followed Cloudtail into the clearing. By now the other cats had begun to emerge from their dens. The apprentices, Featherpaw and Brookpaw among them, were clustered around Cinderpelt, each carrying a bundle of herbs. Ferncloud was with them, speaking urgently in a low voice to Dustpaw.

Closer to the warriors' den, Cloudtail and joined Brightheart, while Mousefur and Longtail stalked around each other in a final practice of their fighting moves. As Sandstar watched, Silverstream and Fireheart slipped out from between the branches of the den with Blossomfall and Blackclaw just behind. Brindleface came up and urged the cats toward the nettle patch for a piece of fresh-kill.

Sandstar felt a rush of pride. These were his cats, brave and loyal, every one of them.

Above him, the outlines of bare branches had began to show black against the sky. Sandstar felt a moment of sheer terror at the reminder of the approaching sunrise. He forced himself to stride confidently across the clearing until he joined Brindleface beside the fresh-kill pile.

"This is it," the pale gray tabby warrior meowed.

Sandstar took a vole from the pile of fresh-kill. His belly was churning with tension, but he forced himself to swallow a few

mouthfuls.

"Sandstar," Brindleface continued after a moment, "I just wanted to say that Oakstar could not have led us better in these terrible days. I've been proud to serve as your deputy."

Sandstar stared at him. "Brindleface, you're talking as if..." He couldn't put what he was afraid of into words. The older warrior's respect meant more to him than he could say, and he couldn't imagine how he would cope if Brindleface did not come back from the battle.

Brindleface concentrated on the blackbird he was eating, avoiding his eyes, and didn't say any more.

The camp was still dark when Smallear emerged with the other elders to see the warriors off. Willowpelt's kits rushed out of the nursery to say goodbye to their father and Fireheart. They looked excited; they didn't fully understand what the Clan was going to face.

"Well, Sandstar," Brightheart meowed. "Is everything ready?" The tip of his tail twitched nervously as he admitted, "I'll be a lot happier when we're on the move."

Sandstar swallowed the last of his vole. "So will I, Brightheart," he replied. "Let's go."

Rising to his paws, he gathered his Clan with a flick of his tail. As his gaze met Fireheart's, he felt strengthened to see her green eyes glow with trust and love.

"Cats of Thunderclan," Sandstar called, "we go now to fight against Bloodclan. But we're not alone. Remember there are four Clans in the forest, and always will be, and the other three will fight with us today. We *will* drive out these evil cats!"

His warriors sprang up, yowling their agreement. Sandstar turned, and began to lead them through the gorse tunnel and up the ravine toward Fourtrees.

When he paused at the top for a last glance back at the camp, he

did not know if he would ever see his beloved home again.

Chapter 28

The first faint streaks of dawn were showing as Sandstar approached Fourtrees. Pausing on the bank of the stream, he glanced back at the warriors who followed him. His heart swelled with pride as his gaze traveled over each one. Fireheart, his beloved; Silverstream, the truest friend any cat ever had; Sorreltail, sensible and loyal; Brindleface, his wise deputy; Blossomfall, the newest warrior of Thunderclan, looking tense and eager at the prospect of his first battle; Longtail, who had discovered at last where her heart lay; Lionheart and Mousefur, a formidable pair of warriors; Ferncloud, reserved but true-hearted, and his apprentice, Ashpaw; Sandstar's own apprentice, Squirrelpaw, a glow in his green eyes and his fur bristling; and Brightheart, wayward but committed to his Clan, with Cloudtail, the cat he had brought back from the brink of death. Pain like claws tore at Sandstar's heart as he realized how much they meant to him, and what fearful danger they were facing now.

He raised his voice so that they could all hear him. "You know what lies ahead of us," he meowed. "I only want to say one thing. Ever since Starclan placed the four Clans in the forest, no leader ever had a band of warriors like you. Whatever happens, I want you to remember that."

"There was never a leader like you, Sandstar," meowed Silverstream.

Sandstar shook his head, his throat too choked for words. It was just like Silverstream to compare him to the truly great leaders like Oakstar, but he knew how far short of that he fell. He could only resolve to do his best to live up to his friends' trust in him.

Crossing the stream, he heard a whisper of movement from the direction of the river and glanced down the slope to see that cats of Riverclan and Shadowclan slipping quietly toward the meeting place. Sandstar signaled a greeting with his tail as the warriors thronged around him, swelling the ranks of his own forces.

He was relieved to see that they had kept their promise, though the look of hostility from Blackfoot told him that even though Shadowclan might be fighting on their side this time, they would never be Thunderclan's friends.

Sandstar spotted Pebble among the Shadowclan warriors. Rowanpaw was there too, looking nervous but determined. Blackclaw went forward hesitantly to greet her friends among the Riverclan cats, touching noses with Shadepelt. Runningnose and Brightsky, the two medicine cats, arrived together, each with an apprentice carrying their supplies, and pushed their way through the throng until they found Cinderpelt. The three united Clans went on to Fourtrees together, with Sandstar and Leopardstar in the lead.

When they came to the top of the hollow, everything was silent. The breeze was blowing away from them, toward Shadowclan territory, and Sandstar felt his pelt prickle with dread. Their scent would be carried to the waiting Bloodclan, while they themselves had no idea where their enemies might be.

"Silverstream, Mousefur," he whispered. "Scout around the hollow. Don't show yourselves. If you see any cats, come back and tell me."

The two cats slid off in opposite directions, barely visible shadows in the gray light. Sandstar waited, trying to appear calm and confident, thankful for the presence of Brindleface and Fireheart close beside him. He had barely time to think about what might happen next when Silverstream returned with another cat close behind him. It was Tallstar.

"Greetings, Sandstar," she murmured. "Windclan is here. All our warriors—and your friends, Raven and Patchpaw."

The loners came up as the Windclan leader spoke their names. "We came to help as we promised," Patchpaw meowed, twining his tail with Sandstar's in greeting. "We'll fight alongside you, if you'll have us."

"If we'll have you?" Sandstar echoed, a purr of gratitude swelling up inside him. "You're welcome; you know that."

"We're proud to fight with you," Raven mewed. Fireheart came up to greet her former Clanmates, and the two loners took positions beside her.

"Do you know where Bloodclan is?" Sandstar asked Tallstar.

Tallstar's eyes were bleak as she gazed across the hollow to the Shadowclan territory. "Somewhere out there, watching us, I'd guess."

Her voice was steady, and Sandstar began to envy her calm, unshaking courage, until he caught the Windclan leader's fear-scent and heard her mutter under her breath, "Starclan help us! Show us an enemy we can fight!"

Somehow the knowledge that Tallstar was as afraid as he was himself only increased Sandstar's respect for the older and more experienced leader. Tallstar would never show fear in front of her Clan. She would put aside her own feelings to do her duty as leader; Sandstar only hoped that he could do the same.

He peered into the shadows, looking for a sign that Mousefur was on his way back. Almost at once he caught sight of him bounding toward him, and in the same heartbeat there was movement in the clearing below. Dark shapes appeared from the bushes at the foot of the opposite slope as Bloodclan advanced in a single menacing line. Sandstar's belly clenched in fear when the small figure of Scourge stepped out.

"I know you're there!" the Bloodclan leader called. "Come and give me your answer."

Sandstar paused for a heartbeat, and glanced at the cats behind him. Though he knew how terrified they must be, he could see nothing but fierce determination in their faces. Lionclan was ready for battle.

"Go on, Sandstar," Leopardstar mewed quietly. His fur was bristling and his ears lay flat against his head in a mixture of fear and defiance. "Lead us."

Sandstar looked at Tallstar, who nodded. "You spoke for us before," she meowed. "You're the one who should lead us now. We all trust you."

Sandstar led the united Clan down into the clearing. Scourge was waiting for him near the base of the Great rock. Her black pelt was neatly groomed and she sat with her paws tucked under her. Her eyes were chips of ice, and the rising sun glinted on the teeth that studded her kittypet collar.

"Greetings," she meowed. She swiped her tongue around her jaws as if she were tasting a succulent piece of prey. "Have you decided to leave? Or do you presume you can fight against Bloodclan?"

"We don't have to fight," Sandstar replied steadily. To his surprise he felt icily calm. "We will let you go back to Twolegplace in peace."

Scourge let out a cold *mrrow* of laughter. "Go back? Do you really think we're such cowards? No, this is our home now."

Feeling the last spark of hope drain out his paws, Sandstar looked past Scourge at the ranks of her Bloodclan warriors. These were lean, tough cats, most of them wearing collars studded with teeth like Scourge, the trophies of earlier battles. Some were flexing claws strengthened with dogs' teeth, and Sandstar remembered the way Scourge's claws had ripped through Goldenstar's belly. Their eyes glittered as they waited for the order to attack.

"The forest is ours," Sandstar told the black cat. "We rule here by the will of Starclan."

"Starclan!" Scourge sneered. "Tales for kits. Forest fool, Starclan won't help you now." She sprang to her paws, her fur suddenly bristling out so that she looked twice her size. "Attack!" she snarled.

The line of Bloodclan warriors surged forward.

"Lionclan, attack!" Sandstar yowled.

He sprang toward Scourge, but the Bloodclan leader dodged nimbly to one side. A huge tabby she-cat leaped into her place, hitting

Sandstar in the flank, knocking him off his paws. The clearing was silent no longer. As Sandstar battered with his hind paws at the Bloodclan warrior, he heard cats crashing through the undergrowth all around the hollow. Leopardstar bounded out of the bushes with Tallstar; Blackfoot raced forward at the head of a tight know of Shadowclan warriors; and Brindleface ran at the lead of the cats of Thunderclan, as all four forest Clans poured into the clearing and fell snarling on their enemies.

Sandstar managed to throw off the Bloodclan cat and scrambled to his paws. Scourge had vanished. Sandstar was surrounded by a heaving mass of cats; he was amazed at how swiftly chaos had descended. He spotted Silverstream battling bravely with a huge black she-cat, and Willowpelt rolling on the ground, his teeth locked in the shoulder of a Bloodclan tortoiseshell. Longtail was nearby, too, squirming helplessly under the weight of two Bloodclan warriors. Sandstar hurled himself into combat and dragged one of the cats away, feeling the strength of the muscular body as the enemy warrior turned on him. He felt claws slash into his shoulder, and raked his own claws across the warrior's face. Blood welled out of a gash on its forehead, dripping into its eyes; blinded, the cat lost its grip on Sandstar, and he aimed a final blow before leaping back and whirling around in search of Longtail.

The pale tabby had driven off her other adversary, but she was bleeding deeply from her shoulder and flank. Sandstar saw Cinderpelt limp rapidly out of the bushes; he nudged Longtail to her feet and helped her, staggering away from the thick of the fighting.

Sandstar sprang back into the battle. Smokefur flashed past him, pursuing a Bloodclan warrior, and he caught a glimpse of Blackclaw fighting shoulder to shoulder with Featherpaw and Brookpaw. Cloudtail was weaving in front of a Bloodclan tabby twice her size, her new fighting techniques already confusing the huge she-cat. Brightheart fought beside her. Cloudtail dodged beneath her enemy's outstretched paws, raking her claws down her nose. The tabby turned and fled. Brightheart let out a yowl of triumph, and the two cats wheeled around as one and flung themselves back into the whirling mob of cats.

Not far away, Raven and Patchpaw were battling side by side

against a pair of identical gray she-cat's, lean warriors whose collars bristled with teeth. "I know you!" one of them spat at Raven. "You didn't have the courage to stay with Scourge."

"At least I had the courage to leave," Raven hissed back at her, rearing up to swipe both forepaws at the gray warrior's ears. "It's your turn to run. You don't belong here."

Patchpaw pressed forward beside her, and the two Bloodclan warriors were gradually forced back into the bushes. A white Bloodclan warrior burst into the open just beside them, with Cloudrunner slashing fiercely at her haunches as she fled from her. "Gorsepaw! Gorsepaw!" she yowled, giving voice to all her grief for her dead daughter. She leaped on the warrior and brought her down, clawing out pawfuls of white fur.

Sandstar looked for Scourge. There could be no victory until the Bloodclan leader was dead, and in a moment's breathing space Sandstar reflected how strange it was that the final battle for the forest would no be with Goldenstar, but with Goldenstar's murderer.

But the Bloodclan leader was nowhere to be seen. Fighting his way toward the base of the Great Rock, lashing out with teeth and claws, Sandstar came face to face with a skinny gray tom. His green eyes glinted with hatred as he Launched himself at him, his teeth and claws digging deep into his shoulder. Sandstar felt his tooth-studded collar crushing his face as he bit down. He twisted, tearing his neck fur free of the Bloodclan warrior's teeth and launching himself at his unprotected belly, to score his claws down it. The tom sprang back and fled into the bushes.

Sandstar stood panting, blood welling from his shoulder. How long could he keep this up, he wondered, before he grew too weak to carry on? There seemed as many Bloodclan warriors as ever in the hollow, all strong and healthy and skilled in combat. Would the battle never end?

A Bloodclan tortoiseshell loomed up in front of him, its face distorted with a screech of hatred. In the same heartbeat a dark shape shot out of the bushes, barreling into the tortoiseshell's side and shoving him away from Sandstar. Astonished, Sandsatr

recognized Darkstripe. Had the dark warrior decided at last that her loyalties belonged to Thunderclan?

A moment later he realized how wrong he was. Darkstripe whirled to face him, hissing. "You're mine, kittypet. It's time for you to die."

Sandstar braced himself for the attack. "So now you're fighting on the side of Goldenstar's murderer?" he taunted Darkstripe. "Have you *no* loyalty?"

"Not anymore," Darkstripe snarled. "Every cat in the forest can turn to crow-food for all I care. All I want is to see you dead."

Sandstar slipped to one side as Darkstripe leaped toward him, but one of the dark warrior's paws caught him on the side of the head and he lost his footing. Darkstripe landed on top of him and pinned him down. Sandstar twisted, trying to free his hind paws. He scrabbled furiously at Darkstripe's belly but could not shake her off. The warrior bared her teeth, aiming for Sandstar's neck. Sandstar braced himself for a last desperate effort.

Suddenly Darkstripe's body rolled off him. Sandstar got to his paws to see Silverstream struggling with his old Clanmate in a screeching knot of fur and claws. Silverstream's pelt was torn and his shoulder glistened with blood from an earlier wound, but before Sandstar could move to help him he flung Darkstripe to the ground and landed on top of him, panting.

"Traitor!" he hissed.

Darkstripe writhed violently, scoring deep gouges in the earth, but he couldn't throw off the silver tabby warrior. "Fox dung!" she spat. She twisted her head, trying to sink her teeth into Silverstream's neck.

Silverstream lashed out with one forepaw. His claws pierced Darkstripe's throat and blood gushed out. The dark tabby gave one convulsive shudder. Her jaws parted as she fought for breath. "There's nothing left..." she choked out. "It's all dark—everything's gone..."

Sandstar saw her eyes glazing, a terrible emptiness in them. Her struggles faded and her body went limp.

Spitting contemptuously, Silverstream scrambled off her. "One less traitor in the forest," he snarled.

Sandstar touched his nose to Silverstream's shoulder. Suddenly Silverstream went rigid, staring past his leader. "Sandstar..." he rasped.

Sandstar whirled around to see Fireheart and Ferncloud fighting side by side at the wedge of the battle. They didn't seem to need his help, and at first he couldn't understand what had distressed Silverstream. Then the mass of cats parted briefly to reveal Bone, the huge Bloodclan deputy, crouched over another cat who moved feebly beneath her. So much blood clotted the victim's fur that Sandstar could hardly make out its color, and it took him a couple of heartbeats to recognize Brindleface.

"No!" he yowled, and he hurled himself at Bone with Silverstream hard on his paws.

Bone sprang backward, only to cannon into Squirrelpaw and Ashpaw, who came charging across the clearing at the same moment. Sandstar saw his apprentice leap onto the huge deputy's back, while Ashpaw bit down into her hind leg.

Confident that Bone would be distracted for a while, Sandstar crouched beside Brindleface, almost oblivious to the battle that surged around them. Recognition glimmered in the pale gray tabby warrior's eyes when he saw Sandstar, and the tip of his tail twitched. "Good bye, Sandstar," he rasped.

"Brindleface, no!" Sandstar felt a wail of agony building up inside him. He should never have brought his deputy into this battle, when all along the pale gray tabby warrior had seemed to know that it would be his last. "Silverstream, find Cinderpelt."

"Too late," Brindleface breathed. "I go to hunt with Starclan."

"You can't—the Clan needs you! I need you!"

"You will find others..." The pale gray tabby warrior's gaze, growing rapidly dimmer, flickered to Silverstream and back again. "Trust your heart, Sandstar. You have always known that Silverstream is the cat Starclan destined to be your deputy."

Letting out a long sigh, he closed his eyes.

"Brindleface..." Sandstar wanted to mewl his grief like a tiny kit. For a heartbeat he pushed his nose into his deputy's blood-soaked fur, the only mourning ritual that the battle allowed.

Then he turned to Silverstream, who was staring in shock at the old warrior's body. "You heard what he said," Sandstar meowed. "He chose you." Rising to his paws, he lifted his voice above the tumult of battle. "I say these words before the body of Brindleface, that his spirit may hear and approve my choice. Silverstream will be the new deputy of Thunderclan."

A yowl of agreement from behind startled him, and Sandstar turned to see Fireheart and Ferncloud pausing to nod briefly at Silverstream before dashing back into the battle again.

Silverstream had not moved, his blue eyes fixed on Sandstar. "Are you... are you sure?"

"Never surer," Sandstar growled. "Now, Silverstream!"

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the Bloodclan deputy struggling free from Squirrelpaw and Ashpaw. Before Sandstar could spring at her, a screech of defiance sounded above the noise of battle and several more apprentices hurled across the clearing. Bone was barely visible under the writhing heap of furious young cats. Squirrelpaw and Ashpaw were there, with Featherpaw and Brookpaw and, yes, Rowanpaw, fighting beside her brother. Within a few heartbeats Bone had stopped trying to defend herself; her body went into a series of spasms, ending in her twitching tail, and as Sandstar watched the twitching stopped. Ashpaw let out a hoarse cry of triumph.

At the same instant Jaggedtooth appeared out of nowhere. Sandstar felt his fur stand on end. Once a rogue, then a member of

Shadowclan, and now part of the insult to the warrior code that was Bloodclan. The massive warrior fling herself on the apprentices and fastened her teeth in the nearest—Squirrelpaw—dragging him off Bone's body. At once Rowanpaw launched herself at the rogue cat. "Let go of my brother!" she spat. The rest of the apprentices sprang forward with her, and Jaggedtooth abruptly dropped Squirrelpaw, turning tail and fleeing across the clearing with all the apprentices in pursuit.

Breathing hard, Sandstar glanced around, and his stomach turned over as he tried to judge how the battle was going. Though Darkstripe and Bone were dead, and Jaggedtooth had been driven off, the clearing still seemed full of Bloodclan warriors, and yet more were racing down the slope. Thunderclan had lost Brindleface, and between the battling cats Sandstar caught a glimpse of Tornear from Windclan lying motionless. Sorreltail and Mousefur fought on side by side, but Sorreltail was limping and Mousefur had deep claw marks stretching all along one side. At the edge of the clearing Lionheart was dragging herself into the bushes, with Dustpaw helping her, and not far away Runningnose, the Shadowclan medicine cat, was pressing cobwebs on a wound in Blackfoot's shoulder, until the Shadowclan deputy shook her off and threw herself back into the fray. Leopardstar appeared briefly, yowling hoarse encouragement to his warriors, before he vanished again in a surge of Bloodclan cats.

We're losing, Sandstar thought, fighting panic. *I must find Scourge!* With the Bloodclan leader's death, he knew the battle would be over. The cats from Twolegplace had no sense of tradition or loyalty to the warrior code. Scourge held them together, and without her they would be nothing.

Sandstar felt his fur begin to bristle as his gaze found Scourge at last. The small black cat was crouched at the base of the Great Rock, her claws slicking at a warrior she had trapped there. Sandstar's belly lurched as he recognized Smokefur.

With a yowl of defiance he leaped across the clearing. Scourge whipped around, leaving Smokefur to crawl away bleeding.

The Bloodclan leader bared her teeth in a snarl. "Sandstar!"

Without warning, she leaped. Sandstar rolled with the impact and landed on top of the smaller cat, planting one paw on her neck. But before he could bite down, Scourge wriggled away with the speed of a snake. The dogs' teeth on her claws flashed as she raked them across Sandstar's shoulder.

Excruciating pain lanced through Sandstar's body. He forced himself not to flinch but leaped forward again, sending Scourge flying back against the Great Rock. Briefly the black she-cat was stunned, and Sandstar managed to bite down on her foreleg. Pain like fire seared through him again with another blow from the Bloodclan leader's claws, and in the shock of it Sandstar lost his grip on Scourge.

The Bloodclan leader reared back, her paw raised for the death blow. Sandstar scrambled to get away, but he was not fast enough. Agony exploded in his head as the reinforced claws struck down. Flame washed over his eyes, fading to leave nothing but darkness. A soft, black tide was rising to engulf him; he made one final effort to get up, but his paws would not support him, and he fell back into nothingness.

Chapter 29

Sandstar opened his eyes. He was lying on the grass of Fourtrees with moonlight washing around him and the rustle of leaves above his head. For a few heartbeats he relaxed, reveling in the warm air of greenleaf.

Then he remembered Fourtrees as he had last seen it, the branches black and stark in the depths of leaf-bare and the clearing thronged with screeching, warring cats.

Abruptly he sat up. He was not alone. The warriors of Starclan lined the clearing, illuminating it with the shimmer of their pelts and the gleam in their eyes. In the front rank Sandstar could see the cats who had given him his nine lives: Oakstar, Raggedpelt, and Spottedleaf, Frostfur... and a newcomer, Brindleface, restored to his youthful strength, with Starlight glimmering in his thick fur.

"Welcome, Sandstar," meowed the pale gray tabby warrior.

Sandstar scrambled to his paws. "Why... why have you brought me here?" he demanded. "I should be back there, fighting to save my Clan."

It was Oakstar who replied. "Look, Sandstar."

Sandstar saw there was a space beside her. At first he thought it was empty, but suddenly he realized that it was filled by the faintest outline of a sandy-colored cat. His green eyes glowed so pale they barely reflected the starlight that filled the hollow, but Sandstar recognized him at once.

"You have lost your first life," Oakstar mewed gently.

A shiver ran through Sandstar. So this was what it felt like to die. He stared in mingled curiosity and fear at the pale copy of himself in the middle of the clearing, and as his gaze locked with the ghost cat's he suddenly saw himself, hunched and bleeding, his fur ragged

and the light of desperation burning in his eyes.

Sandstar wrenched his head aside to break the contact. There was no time for this. Surely the whole point of having nine lives was so that he could keep going?

"Send me back," he begged. "If we're losing the battle, Bloodclan will rule the forest!"

Oakstar stepped forward. "Patience, Sandstar. Your body needs a moment to recover. You will go back soon enough."

"But it might not be in time! Oakstar, why are you letting this happen? Will Starclan not help us, even now?"

The former Thunderclan leader did not reply directly. Instead she sat down, her amber eyes glowing with wisdom. "No cat could have done more than you for Thunderclan," she meowed. "Even though you are no forestborn, you have the heart of a true Clan cat... more than ever Goldenstar or Darkstripe did, for though they taunted you with being a kittypet, they both ended up betraying the Clan of their birth for the sake of their own ambition."

Sandstar's paws worked impatiently in the grass. What was the use of empty praise? He could not tear his mind away from what was happening in that other clearing, where loyal cats were fighting and dying. "Oakstar—"

The she-cat raised her tail to silence him. "Perhaps your quarrel with Goldenstar gave you the strength you need," she went on. "All along, you did what you thought was right, even when your Clanmates disagreed with you. You suffered loneliness and uncertainty, and that has made you what you are now... a gifted intelligent leader with the courage to lead your Clan in its darkest hour."

"But I'm *not* leading them!" Sandstar hissed. "And I can't save them —I'm not strong enough. We're going to lose the battle. Oakstar, this *can't* be the will of Starclan! We've always believed our warrior ancestors wanted there to be four Clans in the forest. Have we been so wrong?"

There was a ripple of movement from the front rank of the starry warriors. Oakstar rose to her paws as she was joined by the other eight cats who had given Sandstar a life at the ceremony beside the Moonstone. All nine of them encircled the young cat who stood defiantly in the center of the clearing.

A voice spoke—not Oakstar this time, but an echo vibrating inside Sandstar's head as if all nine cats were speaking to him at once. "Sandstar, you are wrong. There were never four Clans in the forest."

As Sandstar stared, rigid with shock, the voice went on: "There were always *five*." Sandstar felt nine pairs of eyes, alight with wisdom, resting on him. "Fight bravely, Sandstar. You may return to the battle now, and the spirits of Starclan will go with you."

The shapes of the Starclan warriors seemed to dissolve into light. Sandstar felt their strength flooding through him as water soaked into the thirsty ground, and he knew the courage that came with faith restored.

He opened his eyes. The sounds of battle rushed into his ears and he sprang to his paws. Straight in front of him he saw Brightheart battling with Scourge. The young white and ginger warrior was on the ground, blood flowing freely from his wounds as Scourge shook him by the scruff and raked claws across his flank. But Brightheart had his teeth fastened in Scourge's leg, and even though he was terribly injured he would not let go.

"Scourge!" Sandstar yowled. "Turn and face me!"

The small black cat whipped around, letting go of Brightheart in her shock. "How... I *killed* you."

"You did," Sandstar spat back at her. "But I am a leader with nine lives who fights alongside Starclan. Can you say as much?"

For the first time he thought he saw a flicker of uncertainty in Scourge's cold eyes, and at last Sandstar understood what Raven had told him. Scourge's lack of belief in Starclan was her greatest weakness. Without belief, without the laws and customs of the

forest Clans, Scourge did not have the nine lives of a true leader. When she died, she would be dead forever.

The Bloodclan leader's uncertainty lasts no more than a heartbeat. She aimed a final blow at Brightheart, dislodging the weakening warrior and tossing him up against the Great Rock.

Sandstar launched himself at his enemy. And with every stride, he was aware of the Starclan warriors racing alongside him, matching his pace. Frostfur's white strength; the lithe, muscular body of Dappletail; Redtail's dark fur, her bushy red tail streaming out behind her; Raggedpelt with her claws outstretched; Spottedleaf, swift and determined; Oakstar with all her strength and skill in battle restored.

Sandstar seemed to cover the ground on winged paws. His claws raked along Scourge's side and he dodged a blow to the head like the one that had claimed his first life.

But Scourge was fast. She flung herself between Sandstar's outstretched paws and aimed for his belly, trying to rip him open with the same flick that had destroyed Goldenstar.

Sandstar barely drew back in time. Now he was on the defensive, trying to avoid the gashing claws and still get close enough to Scourge to land a blow of his own. He managed to grip the Bloodclan leader near the base of her tail, and the two cats rolled over and over on the grass, a shrieking whirl of teeth and claws. When they broke apart Sandstar saw his own blood spattering the grass, and knew he had to finish this fight quickly before he weakened again.

When the old trick came back into his mind he scarcely believed it could work against a fighter like Scourge. But he could think of nothing else. He dug his front paws into the bloodstained turf, and crouched in front of his enemy as if he were giving in, every muscle tensed in readiness.

Scourge let out a yowl of triumph and leaped at him. In the same heartbeat, Sandstar hurled himself upward, crashing into Scourge's belly and thrusting her backward onto the ground. His claws

clashed through Scourge's pelt and his teeth met in the black cat's throat until he tasted the gush of warm blood. Sandstar was dimly aware of Scourge's claws flailing viciously at his shoulders but he held on, raking his enemy's belly with his hind paws until the blows that were falling on him grew weaker.

Sandstar shook his head, scattering thick drops of blood from his eyes. He released Scourge's throat and drew back to deal the death blow from an upraised paw. But there was no need. Scourge's eyes were fixed on him, dark pits of hatred, and her body jerked convulsively. She tried to snarl defiance, but the only sound was blood bubbling in her torn throat. Her twitching limbs grew still and her eyes stared sightlessly at the sky.

Flanks heaving, his breath coming in agonizing gasps, Sandstar gazed down at his dead enemy. Who knew where this cat's spirit was heading? Not to the ranks of Starclan, that was for sure.

A skinny black and white Bloodclan cat was battling with Tallstar a couple of tail-lengths away. When she caught sight of Scourge's lifeless body, the Bloodclan warrior froze, staring, and scarcely seemed to notice when Tallstar raked her claws down the side of her head. "Scourge!" she gasped. "No—no!"

She backed away, then turned and fled, blundering into another Bloodclan warrior as she made for the bushes. The second warrior spat furiously and launched herself at Sandstar, but before she could attack she too saw the body of her dead leader.

A terrible wailing broke from her. "Scourge! Scourge is dead!"

As the cry rose above the screeches of battling cats, Sandstar saw the warriors of Bloodclan falter and stop fighting. As they realized that they had lost their leader, they turned and fled. To Sandstar's dazed eyes, the Twolegplace cats seemed to have shrunk. They were no longer fearsome warriors, but ordinary cats who had no place in the forest: slower than Windclan, duller than Riverclan, scrawnier than Shadowclan. All their menace was gone, and with a cry of triumph the forest cats surged after them and chased them out of the hollow.

Numb with exhaustion, Sandstar hardly had the strength to understand that his cats—Lionclan—had won. The forest belonged to Starclan once again.

Chapter 30

The clearing fell silent. Blood glistened on the grass as cold sunlight sliced through the trees. Brightheart struggled to his paws and staggered over to stand beside Sandstar, looking down at Scourge's lifeless black body.

"You did it, Sandstar," he panted. "You saved the forest."

Sandstar gave the young warrior a lick. "We all did," he meowed. He thought back to the trouble his kin had caused when he first arrived in the forest. In those days, Sandstar would never have imagined he could have felt so proud of his wayward nephew. "Go and find Cinderpelt, and get yourself something for those wounds."

Brightheart nodded and limped off across the clearing.

Looking around, Sandstar saw that warriors from each of the four Clans were gathering around their medicine cats at the edge of the clearing. One had become four again; Lionclan was no more.

At first he couldn't see Fireheart, and he felt panic welling up inside him. He was not sure he could bear it if he had lost her. Then he saw her stumbling wearily across the clearing. The fur along one flank was stiff with drying blood, but Sandstar could see that her injuries were not serious.

"Thank Starclan!" he breathed.

He crossed the clearing in two bounds, and Fireheart turned her head to look at him, her green gaze filled with relief. "We did it," she murmured. "We drove out Bloodclan."

Sandstar suddenly felt light-headed, as if the whole of Fourtrees were spinning around him.

"Steady," urged Fireheart, supporting him with her shoulder. "'You've lost a lot of blood. Come and see Cinderpelt."

Sandstar staggered the rest of the way, drinking in Fireheart's scent and feeling comforted by the softness of her fur. When they reached Cinderpelt he collapsed on the ground, wondering if he was about to lose another life. Then he realized he could still hear the sounds all around him in the clearing, and the pain of his scratches throbbed instead of fading as Dustpaw started pressing cobwebs to the worst of his wounds.

"Is he okay?" That was Silverstream's voice. "Hey, come on, Sandstar —you can't give up now!"

"I'm not. I'm tired, that's all." Sandstar blinked up at the silver tabby warrior. "Don't worry; you won't have to be leader for a while yet."

"Sandstar." Fireheart gently prodded his shoulder. "There are more cats coming."

Sandstar sat up to see a group of Riverclan cats padding toward him, headed by Leopardstar. The Riverclan leader dipped his head toward Sandstar. Claw marks covered his pelt, but his eyes were clear and he carried his tail high.

"Well done, Sandstar," he meowed. "They tell me you killed Scourge."

"Every cat fought well," Sandstar replied. "We wouldn't have won unless all the Clans joined together."

"True enough," Leopardstar conceded. "But now we must separate again. I am going to take my Clan home. We must care for our wounded and grieve for our dead."

"And Shadowclan?" Sandstar inquired.

"Shadowclan must go back to their own home," Leopardstar replied firmly. "I have a new deputy, and enough warriors to defend our territory if Shadowclan doesn't respect our borders."

"Who is the new deputy?" Sandstar asked curiously.

"Blackclaw," meowed the Riverclan leader, a glint in his eyes.

As Sandstar stared in astonishment, Blackclaw emerged from the Thunderclan cats, followed by Featherpaw and Brookpaw. "I'm going with Leopardstar," she explained, fixing Sandstar with her mother's gaze. "I'll always be grateful for what you did, but I'm a Riverclan cat at heart."

Sandstar nodded. He had never expected Blackclaw to change her allegiance completely from her birth Clan. "But... as deputy?" he meowed. "After what happened to Stonefur?"

There was deep grief in Blackclaw's eyes, but her determination did not waver. "Leopardstar asked me just before the battle started," she explained. "I said I'd think about it, and now I know I have to do it for Stonefur's sake, and for the sake of the Clan."

Sandstar dipped his head, respecting the hard decision she had made. "Then Starclan goes with you," he meowed. "And may you always be a friend to Thunderclan."

The two young cats beside Blackclaw glanced uncertainly from Sandstar to Leopardstar. "We're going too," Brookpaw mewed. "Riverclan has lost many warriors. They need us."

Featherpaw padded up to Silverstream and touched noses with him. "You'll come and visit us, won't you?"

"Try and stop me." Silverstream's voice was muffled and his eyes were filled with the pain of his kits' divided heritage. "Be the best warriors you can, and make me proud of you."

"You've got something to live up to," Sandstar added. "Your father is Thunderclan deputy now."

The two apprentices pressed close to their father and twined their tails with his. Leopardstar gave them a moment to be together before signaling to them, and the young cats fell in beside him. The Riverclan cats vanished into the bushes and up the slope toward their own territory.

Sandstar's gaze fell on the group of Shadowclan cats not far away, and he noticed that Squirrelpaw was with them, talking to his

sister. Sandstar rose to his paws and limped slowly toward them; Blackfoot got up to meet him as he approached.

"Sandstar." The Shadowclan deputy narrowed her eyes. "So we won the battle after all."

"Yes, we did," Sandstar agreed, adding, "What will you do now, Blackfoot?"

"Take my Clan home, and prepare for a journey to Highstones. I'm their leader now. We have much to do to recover, but life in the forest will go on as usual."

"Then I'll see you at the next Gathering. And Blackfoot, you would do well to learn from the mistakes of your predecessors. I saw what you did to Stonefur at the Bonehill."

A shadow flitted across Blackfoot's eyes, and she did not reply.

Sandstar flicked his tail to beckon Squirrelpaw, who pressed his muzzle briefly against Rowanpaw's flank and slipped through the Shadowclan cats to his mentor's side. Blackfoot rounded up her cats and led them out of the clearing. Runningnose, the medicine cat, brought up the rear with a glance at Sandstar as she went. Sandstar hoped she had better luck with this new leader, after the trouble she had endured with Nightstar and Goldenstar.

Sandstar turned back to his own Clan and found himself face to face with Raven and Patchpaw.

"I wouldn't trust Blackfoot," murmured Patchpaw, watching the last of the Shadowclan warriors disappear into the bushes. "She's a troublemaker if I ever saw one."

"I know," Sandstar replied. "Don't worry. Thunderclan will be ready if she starts anything."

"At least with Scourge dead, the cats from Twolegplace will have the chance to live in peace," Raven remarked with feeling. "They might have a better life now."

"You wouldn't go back to Twolegplace yourself?" Sandstar inquired.

"Not on your life!" Raven's tail shot straight up. "We're heading straight for home."

"But it was good to fight with Thunderclan again," added Patchpaw.

"Thunderclan will always be grateful to you," Sandstar told them warmly. "You're free to come into our territory anytime."

"And you must visit us at the farm whenever you make the journey to Highstones," Raven mewed as they turned away. "I expect we'll be able to spare a mouse or two."

With Riverclan and Shadowclan accounted for, Sandstar wanted to check in with Windclan before he gathered his own cats and headed back to camp. There was a small group of Windclan warriors clustered around Barkface, their medicine cat, but nowhere near as many as there should have been. Tallstar herself was missing. A prickle of fear ran through Sandstar's sandy-colored pelt.

Then he saw the Windclan leader emerging from the bushes on the far side of the clearing. Mudclaw and Cloudrunner and a couple of apprentices were with her. All five cats were panting hard, as if they had been running. Sandstar bounded toward them, expecting to see enemy cats burst into the clearing in pursuit.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "Is Bloodclan chasing you?"

Tallstar let out a satisfied purr. "No, Sandstar. *We* chased *them*. We followed them as far as the Thunderpath. They won't be back here in a hurry."

"Good," Sandstar meowed with deep appreciation.

He saw a similar glow in Cloudrunner's eyes, and realized that at last she felt avenged for the death of Gorsepaw.

Taking a deep breath, Sandstar dipped his head toward Tallstar and meowed, "We have no further need for Lionclan. There are four Clans in the forest again."

He could see the older leader understand what he was saying. They were no longer allies, but rivals, who could meet in friendship only

at Gatherings.

"We owe you our freedom," meowed the Windclan leader. She dipped her head and headed toward the rest of her warriors at the far side of the clearing.

Alone for the first time, Sandstar scrambled up to the top of the Great Rock. The sickening stench of blood rose around him, but up here he could look out over the forest and dare to believe that soon the battle would be no more than a distant memory.

He imagined the spirits of Starclan all around him, sharing the leadership of his Clan. They would be beside him every pawstep until he gave up his last life and went to join them.

"Thank you, Starclan," he murmured. "Thank you for staying with us, fifth Clan of the forest. How could I ever have thought that I faced this battle alone?"

Suddenly he smelled a familiar scent and felt the soft touch of Spottedleaf's pelt brushing against his fur. His breath was warm in his ear. "You are never alone, Sandstar. Your Clan will live on, and I will watch over you forever."

For a moment Sandstar felt all the pain of loss afresh, as if his beloved medicine cat had not died many moons ago, but in this very battle. Then his ears pricked at the sound of claws on rock, and as Spottedleaf's scent faded, Sandstar saw Silverstream and Fireheart climbing toward him, with Squirrelpaw scrambling up behind.

Fireheart pressed her flank to Sandstar's. "Oakstar was right. A sand storm did save the Clan."

"And now there are four Clans again," Silverstream added. "Just as there should be."

No, there are five, Sandstar thought. He looked down over the clearing and the trees that stretched as far as he could see, and his senses filled with the sounds and the scents of his forest home. A thousand secret whispers told him that newleaf was stirring in the

cold earth, shooting up new green fronds and rousing the prey from its long leaf-bare sleep.

The rising sun broke over the trees and flooded the clearing with light and warmth, and it seemed to Sandstar that no dawn had ever been brighter.

We have finished the first arc! Now I know most of you are expecting me to move on to the next arc, but I'm writing these books in chronological order. The next book will be Blackfoot's Reckoning! I will only upload the Prologue today just to get the story out there.